

THE FLORIDA SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

FASP
Florida Association of School Psychologists

VOLUME 51, NUMBER 1
FALL 2026



Untitled by Done by Alex (@donebyalex), via Unsplash

A MESSAGE FROM FASP PRESIDENT AMY CLARK



As we head into fall, there is so much happening across FASP and so much to celebrate! This year has been about IGNITING connections, ideas, advocacy, and action, and I continue to be inspired by what happens when Florida's school psychologists come together with a shared purpose.

We saw that energy firsthand during our Virtual Summer Institute, which was a tremendous success. The virtual format allowed professionals from across Florida and beyond to participate in high-quality professional learning from wherever they were, with continuing education opportunities available for both school psychologists and Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs). Thank you to everyone who attended, presented, planned, and helped make the Institute possible. Your participation demonstrated the value of providing accessible, relevant professional learning opportunities for the professionals serving Florida's students and schools.

Now, we are carrying that momentum into our biggest gathering of the year.

IT'S TIME TO RIDE THE WAVE!

Registration is officially open for the 2026 FASP Annual Conference, October 28–30 at the Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront, with post-conference licensure sessions on October 31.

This year's conference is designed to give us opportunities to learn, connect, recharge, and celebrate the incredible work of school psychologists throughout Florida. With six featured speakers, numerous invited presenters, and more than 40 CE/CPD sessions, attendees will have access to professional learning across a wide range of topics relevant to our work.

Of course, our Annual Conference is about much more than professional development hours. It is one of the few times each year when school psychologists from across our state can come together as a professional community.

We'll reconnect with colleagues, welcome new professionals and graduate students, visit with sponsors and exhibitors, enjoy poster sessions and our Welcome Reception, recognize outstanding contributions during the Awards Ceremony, support the CSFI silent auction, and celebrate together at our Conference Celebration and Member Social.

The conference will also include our Annual General Business Meeting of the membership, an important opportunity to hear about the work of our association, participate in FASP business, and look toward the year ahead.

This year's Business Meeting will be especially meaningful to me as we hold our traditional Passing the Gavel. My tenure as FASP President will come to an end, and our current President-Elect, Jamie Donnelly, will begin her tenure as President.

While passing the gavel marks a change in leadership, it also represents something much larger: the continuity of an association built by generations of school psychologists who have volunteered their time, expertise, and voices on behalf of our profession and Florida's students. I look forward to celebrating that transition with all of you and supporting Jamie and the next FASP leadership team as they carry our work forward.

For our DOH-licensed members, the learning can continue on Saturday, October 31, with post-conference sessions addressing the licensure-required topics of domestic violence and medical errors.

(continued on next page)

A MESSAGE FROM FASP PRESIDENT AMY CLARK

MAKING OUR COLLECTIVE VOICE HEARD

Professional learning and connection are central to FASP's mission, but so is ensuring that school psychologists have a voice in the decisions that affect our profession and the students, families, schools, and communities we serve.

Your FASP Board, committees, and lobbyist continue to monitor issues affecting school psychology in Florida and identify opportunities for our association to engage with policymakers and other stakeholders. As Florida continues to confront a critical shortage of school psychologists, our collective voice is particularly important in conversations surrounding workforce development, professional standards, access to qualified school psychological services, school safety, student resiliency, and timely and effective services for students.

Our advocacy also extends beyond Florida. Through our relationships and collaboration with professional colleagues and organizations nationally, we have opportunities to ensure that the experiences and perspectives of Florida school psychologists are represented in conversations affecting our profession at both the state and national levels.

And advocacy is not something that belongs only to your Board or our lobbyist. FASP is our collective voice.

In the months ahead, watch for opportunities to learn about emerging issues, communicate with policymakers, participate in advocacy efforts, and help us tell the story of what school psychologists contribute every day. The experiences you have in your schools and communities matter, and they help policymakers understand both the challenges facing our profession and the essential role school psychologists play in supporting Florida's students.

FROM IGNITE TO THE NEXT WAVE

As my tenure as FASP President comes to a close, I am incredibly proud of the energy, engagement, and commitment I have seen throughout our association.

IGNITE was never intended to describe a single conference, initiative, or year. It was about sparking connections, encouraging new ideas, strengthening our collective voice, and inspiring people to become engaged in the future of our profession.

Our Virtual Summer Institute demonstrated that momentum. Our advocacy efforts continue to build upon it. And our Annual Conference gives us one more opportunity to bring that energy together and then carry it forward into FASP's next chapter.

So come Ride the Wave with us October 28–30 in St. Petersburg.

Come to learn something new. Come to reconnect with colleagues. Come to meet someone new. Come to participate in your professional association. Come to celebrate our profession and the people who make it stronger.

And come help us pass the gavel as we celebrate what we have accomplished together and look forward to what comes next.

I can't wait to see you in St. Petersburg!

Amy Clark, Ed.S.

President, Florida Association of School Psychologists

FASP EXECUTIVE BOARD

FASP OFFICERS

President

Amy Clark

President-Elect

Jamie Donnelly

Immediate Past President

Joe Latimer

Secretary

Susan Hatcher

Treasurer

Amy Randell

REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Northeast Representative

Lara Manalo

Northwest Representative

Sharon Bartels-Wheelless

East Central Representative

Liz French

West Central Representative

Daniella Maglione

Southeast Representative

Iryna Kasi

Southwest Representative

Dena Landry

South Representative

Joan Kappus

STANDING COMMITTEES

Administration & Supervision

Sharon Bartels-Wheelless

Annual Conference

Alicia Scott

Awards

Rochelle Poole

Bylaws

Joe Latimer

Continuing Education

Rosalind Sheffield-Ballew

Diversity

Maria (Maritza) Gallardo-Cooper

Ethics & Standards of Practice

Ralph Eugene Cash

Membership

Jorge Pajares

Newsletter

Ashley Womble

Planning & Development

Shaniya Morris

Private Practice

Paula Lewis

Professional Development

Fransheka Portalatin

Public Policy & Professional Relations

Austin Cole

Research

Iryna Kasi

Student Delegate

Isabella Espino

Technology and Communication

Karly Mendoza

Training & Credentialing

Sarah Lawson

SPECIAL COMMITTEES

Interest Groups

Joan Kappus

Public & Media Relations

Liz French

LIAISON POSITIONS (Not Appointed)

Children's Services Fund, Inc.

Sarah Valley Gray

FLDOE Consultant

Mirtha Santisi

NASP Delegate

Monica Oganess

FASP Lobbyists

Bob Cerra & John Cerra

In This Issue

- 2 Message from the President
- 6 FASP 53rd Annual Conference
- 10 Inspire Connection: Celebrating National School Psychology Week in Florida
- 14 2026 FASP Summer Institute Wrap-Up
- 16 NEW FEATURE! School Psychology Beyond the Schools: Exploring Alternative Career Roles
- 22 School Psychologist Burnout: Why the Helpers in the Building Wait Too Long for Their Own Care
- 25 Beyond "Dopamine Withdrawal": How Digital Reward Cycles Are Shaping Student Behavior in Schools
- 31 Beyond Stickers: Finding Meaningful Reinforcers Through the Premack Principle
- 35 School Psychologists and the Department of Justice
- 40 Improving Diverse Student Outcomes: Culturally Responsive Assessment and Interventions

Thank You to Our Platinum Sponsors

- 5 MHS
- 8 PAR
- 9 Riverside Insights





CONNERS CBRS²

Conners Comprehensive Behavior
Rating Scales™ 2nd Edition



Find Clarity
in Complexity

Evaluate behavioral, emotional, social, and academic functioning with a broadband assessment built on a modern domain-based framework that transforms complex information into actionable insights.



Scan to
learn more





FASP 53rd Annual Conference October 28–30, 2026 Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront

www.fasp.org/annual-conference
annualconference@fasp.org

Stronger Connection, Bigger Impact

SCHEDULE AT-A-GLANCE

Wednesday

- Featured Speakers
- Job and Internship Fair
- Business Meeting
- Poster Sessions
- Welcome Reception (lite bites & cash bar)
- Awards Ceremony

Thursday

- Keynote
- Featured Speakers
- Trainers & Supervisors Meeting
- Celebration Reception (lite bites & cash bar)

Friday

- Morning Sessions (select at registration)
- Afternoon Sessions (select at registration)

Saturday

- Post-Conference Licensure Sessions

HOTEL INFORMATION

Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront Hotel
333 1st St SE, St. Petersburg, FL 33701

- Free wifi in meeting spaces & guest rooms
- Discounted valet parking for guests (\$21.50/day)

REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Wednesday & Thursday Only

- Early Career/Retired Members \$200
- Regular/Associate Members \$260
- Student Members \$115
- Non-Member \$385

Wednesday - Friday

- Early Career/Retired Members \$260
- Regular/Associate Members \$335
- Student Members \$145
- Non-Members \$485

Friday Only

- Early Career/Retired Members \$130
- Regular/Associate Members \$160
- Student Members \$85
- Non-Members \$185

Saturday Post-Conference Sessions

- Medical Errors OR Domestic Violence
 - Member \$35
 - Non-Member \$65
- Medical Errors AND Domestic Violence
 - Member \$60
 - Non-Member \$120



Stronger Connection, Bigger Impact

FEATURED SPEAKERS

Wednesday



Shannon Suldo, Ph.D.

Incorporating Positive Psychology Practices in Small Group and Individual Counseling



Peter Isquith, Ph.D.

From Paralysis to Progress: Assessing and Addressing Executive Function and Emotion Regulation in Students



Noelle DeLaCruz, Psy.D.

Building Bridges: Supporting LGBTQ+ Students and Families Through Collaboration and Advocacy

Thursday



Charles Barrett, Ph.D.

General Session: Top Ten List for Educators, Especially School Psychologists



Cecil Reynolds, Ph.D.

BASC-4: A Comprehensive System of Behavioral and Emotional Assessment: Getting It Right and Getting to Interventions That Work!

QUESTIONS?

annualconference@fasp.org

Friday



Sam Ortiz, Ph.D.

Defensible Special Education Evaluations for English Learners - Past, Present, or Future, It's All About Validity



Joe Latimer, Ph.D.

Better Decision Making: Navigating Implementation of School-based Mental Health



Austin Cole, Ph.D.

Making Waves: Advanced Advocacy in Action



Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

From Teens to Twenties: Using the ASRS to Guide Adult Transition

Saturday (Post-Conference)



Ralph (Gene) Cash, Ph.D.

Domestic Violence



Rance Harbor, Ph.D.

Medical Errors



AI REPORT WRITER PsychED REPORT™

Growing caseloads and tight IDEA timelines crowd out the prevention and consultation work only you can do. The **PsychEd Report** turns your assessment data into a structured first draft, including IDEA Eligibility, IEP Goals, and Behavior Support Plan sections. Every draft is yours to review, edit, and finalize.

Built for PreK-12 School Professionals

-  **IDEA Eligibility:** Aligned to federal criteria
-  **Action Plan:** Short-term and long-term supports
-  **IEP Goals:** Draft goals and accommodations
-  **Behavior Support Plan:** A structured starting point
-  **Secure by design:** FERPA, COPPA, and SOC 2 compliant

Save time while helping your students thrive.

AI-Boosted Report Writing

Cut Report Time. Keep Your Professional Judgment.

NEW SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS | SAVINGS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

ONE ANNUAL COST

Materials, training, and reports included. Annual terms align with district fiscal-year planning.

 **Customer Support** 1.800.331.8378

 **CS@parinc.com**



 **LEARN MORE**

Engage and Support English Learners Throughout the Lifespan

One connected suite of assessment follows every English Learner from early childhood through school-age evaluation - in the language that fits the child.



Do you have the insights to know...

Based on dominance:

Spanish-dominant → **Bateria IV**

English dominant → **WJ V**

Mixed skills → **Both**

WJ V NV → Whenever language could influence results.



Pair WJ V (or WJ V NV) with BDI-3 Spanish so cognitive ability and academic skills are understood within a developmental and functional context.

4

...a student's **true cognitive abilities**, without language getting in the way?

WJ V WOODCOCK JOHNSON® Nonverbal

5

...a student's **cognitive processing and achievement**.

WJ V WOODCOCK JOHNSON®

6

...What drives a student's **learning** and where his **academic skills** stand?

Bateria IV **Bateria IV**

3

...what **language(s)** a student should be tested in, and if there is evidence of limited English proficiency?

W M L S Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey III

2

...if a student is **mastering early childhood developmental milestones**

Battelle Developmental Inventory 3rd Edition Spanish

1

...if there are **areas of concern** in a student's early developmental milestones

Battelle Developmental Inventory 3rd Edition Spanish

SCHOOL AGED YEARS AND BEYOND

EARLY YEARS



Every child. Every age.
A connected path to the right insight.
Learn more at riversideinsights.com

Inspire Connection: Celebrating National School Psychology Week in Florida

Monica Ogan, Florida Delegate to the National Association of School Psychologists

From **November 9–13, 2026**, school psychologists and school communities across the country will celebrate National School Psychology Week (NSPW). This year's theme, **"Inspire Connection,"** recognizes something central to our work: meaningful relationships help students thrive. NASP describes the week as an opportunity to celebrate the contributions of school psychologists and the connections they build with students, families, educators, and communities.

Connection may sound simple, but in schools it takes deliberate work. A student needs to feel heard before they can tell us what is making school difficult. A family needs to trust that its perspective matters before a meeting becomes a genuine partnership. A teacher needs a colleague who will help understand a concern and work through possible solutions. School psychologists are often in a position to bring these perspectives together.

We see the value of connection in individual moments: a student who begins to seek help, a family that leaves a meeting understanding the plan, or a teacher who feels supported in trying a new intervention. We also see it in the systems we help

build. When teams share information, examine student needs together, and follow up on whether supports are working, schools can respond more effectively. NSPW gives us a chance to recognize both the personal and the collaborative parts of our profession.

A POSTER THAT STARTS A CONVERSATION

NASP's 2026 **"Inspire Connection" poster** can be more than a display for the week. Place it where students, families, and staff will see it, then use it to begin a conversation: *Who helps you feel connected at school? How do you help someone else feel included? What could our school do to make it easier to ask for help?*

Those questions can take different forms across grade levels. Younger students might draw or name people they can turn to. Older students might discuss what helps a new student feel welcome or what makes it easier to approach an adult with a concern. Staff might use the poster to reflect on which students are well connected to school and which students may need a more intentional invitation into the community.

NASP offers the poster in **English and Spanish**, and posters and stickers are available through its store. If you plan to use the artwork in a newsletter, handout, or other publication, check NASP's posted guidance on reproduction and distribution.

A FOCUS FOR EACH DAY

NASP's [2026 theme page](#) provides a question for each day of NSPW. These prompts offer an easy way to plan a week that goes beyond a single announcement or thank-you message.

Monday asks, "What connections inspire you?" We can begin by recognizing the partnerships that help students succeed. Consider thanking a teach-



er, family member, support staff member, or community partner for something specific they contributed. A concrete example tells people more about our shared work than a general expression of appreciation.

Tuesday asks, “Where can connection take you?” This is an opportunity to show how school psychologists connect people, information, and services. An example might be how a team combines classroom observations, family input, student perspectives, and progress data to decide what support to try next. It can also help others see the breadth of school psychological services, including consultation, intervention, mental and behavioral health support, and work at the schoolwide level.

Wednesday asks, “How will we inspire change?” Connection can lead to advocacy. NASP points to shortages of school psychologists and the need to work with educators, families, and communities to strengthen students’ access to support. We can use the day to explain what comprehensive school psychological services look like and what conditions allow us to provide them. Sharing an example from our own practice can make that conversation more meaningful to decision makers.

Thursday asks, “What connects us?” This prompt turns our attention to belonging. Students are more than the concerns that bring them to a team meeting. Their identities, experiences, interests, and strengths matter to how they experience school. We can ask whose perspectives are represented in our conversations and whose we need to seek out more actively.

Friday invites us to carry connection forward. Recognition is valuable, especially in a profession whose work is sometimes behind the scenes. The strongest conclusion to NSPW, though, is a commitment we can act on afterward: a new partnership, a clearer way to communicate with families, or a regular opportunity to hear directly from students.

GET READY TOGETHER AT THE OCTOBER 14 TOWN HALL

Members do not have to plan the week on their

own. **NASP will host a virtual NSPW Member Town Hall on Wednesday, October 14, at 8:00 p.m. ET.** Members will hear practical ideas from NASP’s Professional Communication Committee, explore resources they can use in their schools and communities, and learn how other members are planning to celebrate.

I encourage Florida members to [register for the NSPW Member Town Hall](#). Bring a question, an idea you are considering, or simply a willingness to see what colleagues are doing. The gathering is a chance to make connections of our own before we invite our school communities to do the same.

RESOURCES TO HELP FLORIDA MEMBERS PARTICIPATE

NASP’s [NSPW page](#) gathers planning and communication tools in its **“In This Section”** links. Members can explore suggested activities, sample resources, a state resource guide, and information about Advocacy Action Day. The sample resources include a letter to the school community, a press release, a sample proclamation, coloring pages, and activities for graduate programs. These materials can help members choose an activity that fits the time and support available in their setting.

A school psychologist with limited time might share a short introduction to their role and invite one question from staff or families. A district team might coordinate messages across schools or work with its communications office to describe school psychological services to the wider community. Graduate students and faculty can use the week to connect future school psychologists with practicing colleagues. NASP also highlights programs focused on gratitude, recognizing individual contributions, and celebrating students’ strengths.

WHAT CONNECTION ASKS OF US IN FLORIDA

Across Florida, the relationships we build must reflect the students and communities we serve. Families bring different languages, experiences with schools, and understandings of their children’s strengths and needs. We build stronger partnerships when we listen first, explain our findings clearly, and make space for families to participate fully. When language access is needed, that participation requires preparation and appropriate interpretation, not simply an invitation to attend.

The same care applies when we work with educators. A teacher seeking help may be managing many needs at once. Connection means asking what they have observed, understanding what is feasible in their classroom, and agreeing on how we will know whether a plan is helping. Our expertise is most useful when it becomes part of a shared effort that can be carried through and adjusted over time.

As we prepare for November, I encourage FASP members to choose **one connection to strengthen**. Reach out to a family whose perspective you need to understand better. Invite a student's voice into a discussion about their support. Check in with a teacher after an intervention begins. Thank a colleague whose work often goes unseen. Use the NASP poster or daily prompts to open a conversation, then decide how that conversation will continue.

National School Psychology Week celebrates school psychologists, but it also reminds us why our work matters. Every day, we have opportunities to help students feel understood, bring people together around a shared concern, and make school a place where more children can thrive. Let us use

"Inspire Connection" as both a celebration of that work and an invitation to deepen it throughout the year.

AI Disclosure: Generative AI was used to assist with drafting and editing this post. I reviewed and revised the content and take responsibility for its accuracy and final form.





22nd ANNUAL MILLER SCHOOL NEUROPSYCHOLOGY VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

MARCH 18-20, 2027

REGISTRATION BEGINS **JANUARY 1**



EARN UP TO 33 CES

Visit schoolneuropsych.com/conferences.php for more details.

PRECONFERENCE

Technology's Impact on Youth

KEYNOTE

Updated School Neuropsychology Assessment Model

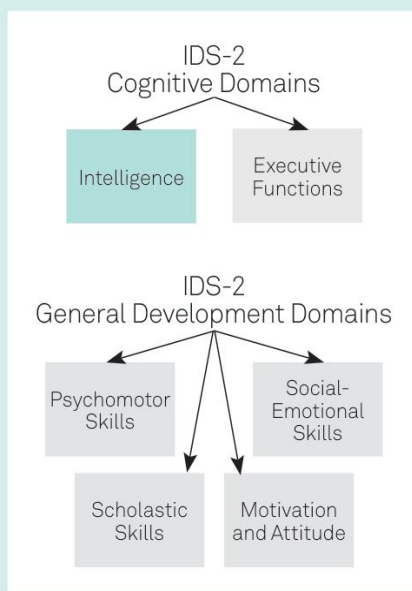
REGULAR SESSIONS

- Adaptive Evaluations for Motor & Communication Impairments
- Bilingual & Multicultural Assessment
- Central Auditory Processing Disorder
- Clinical Reasoning in Assessment
- Ethics and Gray Areas in Assessment
- Math Assessment & Intervention
- Pediatric Cancer & School Re-entry
- Reading Assessment & Intervention

APPROVED BY NASP, APA, AND NYBOE TO OFFER CE CREDIT*
 SCHOOL NEUROPSYCHOLOGY INSTITUTE (SNI) IS APPROVED BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS TO OFFER CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS. SNI MAINTAINS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS PROGRAM AND ITS CONTENTS. SCHOOL NEUROPSYCHOLOGY INSTITUTE IS APPROVED BY THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION TO OFFER CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS. SNI MAINTAINS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS PROGRAM AND ITS CONTENTS. SCHOOL NEUROPSYCHOLOGY INSTITUTE IS RECOGNIZED BY THE NEW YORK STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S STATE BOARD FOR PSYCHOLOGY AS AN APPROVED PROVIDER OF CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR LICENSED PSYCHOLOGISTS #PSY-0106. CONTINUING EDUCATION UNITS EARNED FROM THIS PROGRAM ARE ACCEPTED BY THE CALIFORNIA BOARD OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES FOR LEPS.



...because children and adolescents are more than just an IQ score.



Intelligence and Development Scales® – 2nd Edition (IDS-2)

- **Holistic Approach:** Assesses the “whole child” within one standardized battery
- **Intelligence:** Provides an IQ Score based on Cattell-Horn-Carroll model
- **Executive Functions:** Measures inhibition, working memory, planning, and cognitive flexibility to determine self-regulation and cognitive control
- **General Development:** Evaluates Psychomotor Skills, Social-Emotional Skills, Scholastic Skills, and Motivation and Attitude
- **Expanded Age Range:** Provides current norms matching U.S. population percentages for ages 5–21
- **All-Inclusive Scoring:** Includes online scoring with paper-and-pencil administration (no subscription necessary)



bit.ly/NewIDS-2

Complimentary eLearning is included with each IDS-2 Introductory Kit in 2026

Scan the QR code or the visit the link to order your kit today!

Hogrefe Publishing Corporation

44 Merrimac St.
Newburyport, MA 01950
978025503700
customersupport@hogrefe.com
www.hogrefe.com

@HogrefePublishing
 /company/Hogrefe-Publishing



2026 FASP Summer Institute Wrap-Up

Ashley Womble, FASP Newsletter Chair

This summer, school psychologists and related professionals from across the state came together for the 2026 FASP Summer Institute: Impact in Action, a two-day virtual event focused on strengthening practice and promoting positive outcomes for students and schools.

Attendees participated in engaging sessions on topics such as behavioral and executive functioning supports, gamified tiered interventions, selective mutism, and effective advocacy. We extend our appreciation to the outstanding presenters, including Dr. Evan Dart, Dr. Christopher Barclay, Dr. Nick Cutro, Dr. Jessica Minahan, Dr. Jami Furr, Dr. Austin Cole, Dr. Noelle DeLaCruz, and John Cerra, for sharing

their expertise and practical strategies with attendees.

Thank you to everyone who attended, presented, and helped make this year's Summer Institute a success. The engagement and collaboration demonstrated throughout the event reflect the strength of Florida's school psychology community.

We look forward to continuing the conversation and re-connecting with many of you at the upcoming FASP Annual Conference. Until then, thank you for your continued support of FASP and for the important work you do on behalf of students, families, and schools.



SageReport is raffling off one-year subscriptions and Yetis at our table.

Stop by our table at FASP and see how SageReport helps school psychologists write high-quality, district-aligned reports, and more. **Get life-changing time back.**

220+

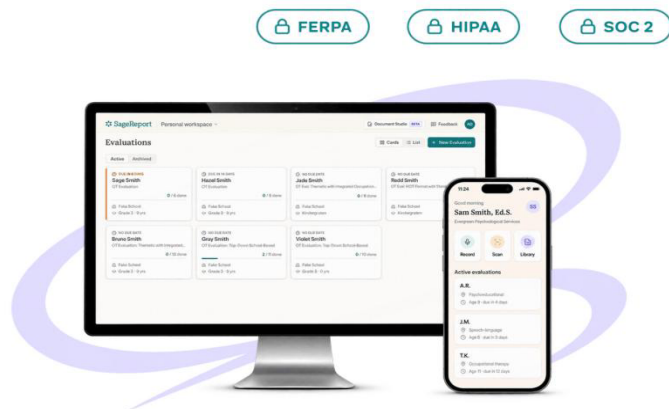
Assessment types

75-95%

Writing time saved

25%

working hours returned



Report Writer

Fully integrated reports, aligned to your state's criteria and your district's template.



Case Assistant

A secure, case-aware chat that helps you think through cases and find the right information.



Document Studio

Generate unlimited case-related documents from curated templates, or save your own.



Mobile app

Securely transcribe interviews and notes, and upload handwritten protocols while on the go.



Scan to see a 3-minute product demo.

YOUR FIRST YEAR

\$39/month

Free 2-week trial

USE CODE BY NOV. 15
FASP

 SageReport

BASC™-4

Behavior Assessment System for Children, Fourth Edition

BASC-4 helps clinicians evaluate behavioral and emotional strengths and concerns from preschool through college age with teacher and parent rating forms, self-report forms, observation tools, and history questionnaires.

Use results to support screening, intervention planning, diagnosis, and special education decisions.



Pearson

Connect with
your Pearson rep



**Kara
Canale**

800-627-7271 | PearsonAssessments.com

© 2026 Pearson Education, Inc. or its affiliates. All rights reserved. Pearson and BASC are trademarks, in the US and/or other countries, of Pearson plc. EI603



*Florida Association
of School Psychologists*

*Stronger
Together
for Florida's
Students*



GET INVOLVED WITH FASP

CONNECT. CONTRIBUTE. LEAD.

The Florida Association of School Psychologists is strengthened by the dedication and expertise of its members. Stay engaged and help advance the profession across Florida.



WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

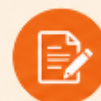
- Renew your FASP membership
- Attend conferences and professional learning events
- Present workshops and share expertise
- Submit articles to *The Florida School Psychologist*
- Volunteer for committees and leadership opportunities



MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

Your membership supports advocacy, professional development, networking, and resources for school psychologists statewide.

*Together
We Make a Difference*



SHARE YOUR VOICE

Newsletter submissions are accepted year-round. Articles may be up to 3,000 words and can focus on practice, research, advocacy, or professional experiences.

✉ awomble@fasp.org



www.fasp.org

STAY PLUGGED IN. STAY INFORMED. STAY INVOLVED.

NEW FEATURE! School Psychology Beyond the Schools: Exploring Alternative Career Roles

Dr. Staci Lorenzo Suits, Owner of EduWorks of North Florida and Associate Director of the School Neuropsychology Institute



Welcome to the debut installment of this recurring feature, which shines a spotlight on school psychologists who are carving out impactful career paths outside of conventional educational settings.

By venturing beyond the traditional school environment, these practitioners showcase the extensive adaptability, clinical depth, and versatile expertise inherent in our training, encouraging colleagues to expand their vision of what can be achieved within the profession.

Our first featured guest is Dr. Maggie Neidhardt, NCSP, co-owner of Maglione, Neidhardt, & Associates. Maggie is a licensed school psychologist and a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC) through the Florida Department of Health. Like many of us in the field, she found her way to school psychology through a series of fortunate detours.

After earning her B.A. in Psychology, Maggie became a teacher at a center-based school serving children with significant behavioral and emotional challenges, where she worked for seven years. During that time, she earned a master's degree in Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD), became a statewide trainer for a Georgia Learning Resource Services center, and taught as an adjunct professor in Mercer University's College of Education.

Maggie later transitioned into the role of Treatment Coordinator at the school. Because the position involved significant leadership responsibilities, she obtained a specialist degree in Educational Leadership from Columbus State University. Through her work with children in crisis, she developed an even deeper

appreciation for the complex challenges students may face when trying to learn while also managing disabilities and mental health concerns. That experience ultimately inspired her to pursue a specialist degree in School Psychology from Valdosta State University.

After graduation, Maggie moved to Florida and began working as a school psychologist with Hillsborough County Schools. Although she enjoyed many aspects of the position, she became frustrated by the amount of time devoted to spreadsheets, meetings, and school-based instructional initiatives. She valued opportunities to contribute to systems-level change, but her greatest professional passion remained working directly with individual students and helping staff identify pathways toward more successful functioning. She also found the extensive travel required across the district increasingly difficult to manage while raising two young children and having a husband who frequently worked out of town.

Maggie subsequently took a leave of absence and pursued her Doctorate of Education in School Psychology at Loyola University Chicago. During that time, she began working in private practice with a close friend to supplement her income. What initially began as a practical arrangement ultimately helped clarify the direction she wanted her career to take. After completing her doctorate, Maggie realized that private practice allowed her to spend more of her time engaged in the work she found most meaningful and less time navigating the structural demands of a large school system. She therefore made the decision to transition into private practice full-time.

Through her extensive graduate coursework and additional supervised experience, Maggie was also able to become a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. Today, she works with both children and adults, combining her backgrounds in education, school psychology, and

mental health counseling in a career that reflects the professional interests and priorities she developed throughout her journey.

In the conversation that follows, Maggie shares her perspective on building a career beyond the traditional school setting and finding work that aligns with her professional strengths and passions.

WHAT EXPERIENCES FIRST LED YOU TO CONSIDER A LESS TRADITIONAL PROFESSIONAL PATH?

I really enjoyed being able to put more of my time into the work I loved: counseling, assessing, and working directly with families. There was a great deal of additional duties that I felt detracted from the time I wanted to spend doing what I was the only person on campus trained and certified to perform.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT PROFESSIONAL ROLE?

I provide comprehensive evaluations for students from PK through graduate school, as well as psychotherapy for children, adolescents, and adults. I also run the practice along with a partner, and have administrative duties to manage the day-to-day business of the practice.

IN WHAT WAYS DOES YOUR CURRENT WORK DIFFER FROM A TRADITIONAL SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY POSITION?

I no longer have the pleasure of working with students in school and I do miss that. However, I also don't have to attend district team or school-based meetings, complete compliance related paperwork, or serve on school-based leadership teams. Although I enjoyed participating in systems level change at the school level, I was ready to put my focus into evaluations and mental health, which was sometimes difficult to do when working within the scope of someone else's agenda.

WHICH ASPECTS OF YOUR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY TRAINING ARE MOST VALUABLE IN YOUR CURRENT ROLE?

While my assessment training has been invaluable to my role as an evaluator, I am also incredibly grateful for the coursework I completed during both my Specialist and Doctorate degrees intended to prepare me to offer counseling services. I am finding a great deal of fulfillment in utilizing my training as a psychotherapist. I think all of us have a strong desire to help others, and I feel that I spend most of my day doing something that gives me an incredible reward.

WHAT MIGHT A TYPICAL WORKDAY OR WORKWEEK LOOK LIKE FOR YOU?

I have two days a week for evaluations, and three days a week for counseling. Beyond direct service time, I write and review counseling notes, create treatment plans, collaborate with schools and families, and of course write the reports for the evaluations I have conducted. Part of my days are dedicated to managing client questions or scheduling as well as talking to prospective clients. As I mentioned before, I also have some administrative duties, but I enjoy those because they grow my practice, which provides me with even more opportunities to help others.

WHAT PROFESSIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT IN THIS ROLE HAS BEEN ESPECIALLY MEANINGFUL TO YOU?

It is incredibly rewarding to spend the majority of my time providing support directly to individuals in need. I've recently broadened my ability to provide therapeutic support, having attended Basic and Advanced Accelerated Resolution Therapy (ART) training. The progress made by some of my clients has been truly fascinating and I so wish I had this skill earlier in my career. Because I've spent so much of my career looking for the next accomplishment, it is odd to me that I am not looking for any particular professional accomplishments and nevertheless feel so fulfilled. Working with individuals regularly and watching them work hard to feel and function better has been an amazing reward for me. I feel so

very blessed to have a career that offers me such a sense of joy.

WHAT IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGE ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR CURRENT ROLE?

I no longer have the benefit of an educator retirement plan. My husband is retired from the military, so we have access to health insurance, but that would also be a hardship if I was managing that responsibility on my own. Essentially, with all the flexibility comes the responsibility of managing your own healthcare and retirement. Additionally, if I need to take off work, I don't get paid. There are no sick days when you work for yourself.

WHAT RESOURCES OR NETWORKS SHOULD PRACTITIONERS LEVERAGE IF THEY WANT TO FOLLOW A SIMILAR PATH?

I am blessed to be able to partner with an individual who already possessed an established reputation as a skilled evaluator. We also were fortunate to have collaborated with a local psychiatrist on several cases, from whom we later rented space. I think creating a name for yourself by collaborating with other reputable providers is key. When you are in private practice, if you don't network, you are on an island.

WHAT FIRST STEP WOULD YOU RECOMMEND TO A SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST INTERESTED IN EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE ROLES?

Honestly, that is hard to say because all good opportunities have come to me by happenstance, although my business partner would say it was the quality of my work that put me in a place to benefit from opportunities. I would say that it is important to think deeply about what you love to do and be sure the private practice work meets your professional and financial needs.

WHERE DO YOU SEE THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS TO EXPAND THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE FUTURE?

In the schools we are trained to be advocates. Since I was an administrator and have exten-

sive experience working with special education law, I love taking the critical and thorough eye of a school psychologist and applying it to advocacy work. It's helpful to be able to support families in their journey even after the evaluation is complete. I would say that school psychologists' unique contribution is to slow down and take a deeper look at what an individual needs and have the knowledge to advocate for that, even when the faster systems are inclined to shuffle students through a process, rather than use the process to understand and support the student.

WHAT KEEPS YOU MOTIVATED AND INSPIRED TO CONTINUE DOING THIS WORK?

I just really love it so much. When I was in high school, I was given a career inventory and it predicted I might enjoy the role of teacher, therapist, or psychologist. At the time, I wanted to be a computer programmer, and thought the assessment was garbage. While taking my first psychology class at Mercer, which I selected merely because it met an elective requirement, I became enamored with the subject. Helping others has always filled my bucket, so I'm immensely grateful to have a job that both fascinates and fulfills me. I'm also innately curious, which I think might be my most valuable asset. Even after 30 years, I still am blessed daily with opportunities to learn. Every person is unique and their insights are a gift.

JOIN THE DIALOGUE

We trust this initial feature has sparked inspiration and reinforced the immense professional versatility our clinical training provides. Our vision is to establish this column as a permanent fixture in the *FASP newsletter*, consistently showcasing the diverse and exceptional career trajectories of school psychologists. If you practice in an unconventional setting, or if you know a colleague whose unique career path deserves recognition in an upcoming edition, please reach out. **You can share your suggestions directly with Staci Suits at stacisuits@eduworksntl.com.**

Beyond the School Setting: Exploring Private Practice in School Psychology

Monica Ogan, Ph.D., Monica Ogan & Associates

For many school psychologists, our professional identity is closely connected to the school setting. Our graduate preparation emphasizes assessment, consultation, intervention, prevention, mental and behavioral health, and collaboration with families and educators, most often within the context of schools. However, the knowledge and skills we develop as school psychologists can extend well beyond the school setting.

Private practice is one way to expand how we use those skills. It can provide opportunities to work directly with children and families, develop areas of specialization, address needs that may not be adequately met in other settings, and have greater autonomy over the services we provide.

I have been involved in private practice for many years, and one thing I have learned is that there is no single model for what a school psychology private practice should look like. Some school psychologists develop full-time practices, while others provide services on a limited basis in addition to their school-based positions. Practices may focus on psychoeducational or mental health assessment, consultation with families and schools, academic or behavioral intervention, counseling, parent consultation, gifted assessment, ASD, ADHD and learning evaluations, or other services that fall within the practitioner's training, competence, and legal scope of practice.

That flexibility is one of the things that makes private practice appealing.

WHAT DO SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS BRING TO PRIVATE PRACTICE?

I believe school psychologists bring a particularly valuable perspective to private practice. We are trained to understand children not only as individuals, but also within the systems in which they learn and develop. We consider cognitive, academic, behavioral, social-emotional, developmental, environmental, and cultural factors when trying to understand a child's functioning.

Our understanding of schools is also extremely valuable when working privately with children and families. We know how educational decisions are made, how interventions are implemented, and how data are used to guide those decisions. We understand exceptional student education, multi-tiered systems of support, progress monitoring, accommodations, and the many factors that can affect a student's performance in school. This background allows us to do something particularly important in private practice: connect what we learn about a child through an evaluation or consultation to what is actually happening in the classroom and translate our findings into recommendations that can be meaningful for families and educators.

Assessment is another area in which school psychologists bring considerable expertise. A comprehensive evaluation involves much more than administering tests and reporting scores. It requires selecting appropriate instruments, integrating multiple sources of information, considering alternative explanations for findings, understanding the limitations of our data, and translating results into recommendations that are useful to the child, family, and school.

These are skills that are deeply embedded in our training as school psychologists.

WHY CONSIDER PRIVATE PRACTICE?

School psychologists consider private practice for many different reasons. Some want greater professional autonomy. Others identify a need in their communities that they believe they are uniquely qualified to address. Some want the opportunity to specialize in an area of particular interest or to work more directly with families. Private practice can also provide flexibility, an additional source of professional income, and opportunities to use our skills in ways that may not be possible within our regular employment.

Private practice also does not have to mean leaving the schools.

In fact, I think this is an important misconception to address. A school psychologist can begin very gradually, perhaps by accepting a small number of cases outside of regular employment. Starting slowly can provide an opportunity to learn what is involved in running a practice while deciding whether private practice is something you want to pursue more extensively.

However, there is something I wish more school psychologists understood before they begin: being an excellent school psychologist does not automatically prepare you to run an excellent private practice.

WHEN YOU BECOME RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PRACTICE

When we work within a school system, many of the structures surrounding our professional work already exist. There are procedures for maintaining records, obtaining consent, protecting confidential information, purchasing assessment materials, responding to requests for records, and addressing legal or administrative concerns. We may have administrators, attorneys, technology departments, human resources personnel, and others available when questions arise.

In private practice, many of those responsibilities become ours.

Suddenly, we must think not only about the quality of the professional services we provide, but also about informed consent, confidentiality and privacy requirements, recordkeeping, professional liability insurance, fees, cancellations, payment collection, secure communication, test security, telehealth, releases of information, business operations, taxes, marketing, and many other issues.

Questions that appear straightforward can also become surprisingly complicated.

Who is the client when parents are separated or divorced? Who can consent to an evaluation? Who is entitled to receive the report? How should electronic records be stored? What information can be shared with a school? What happens if a parent asks that certain findings not be included in a report? How long do records need to be maintained? What should we do when another professional requests testing materials? What language can we appropriately use when communicating conclusions?

These are not simply business questions. Many are legal and ethical questions as well.

ETHICS AND LAW DO NOT END AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR

Moving into private practice does not change our obligation to practice ethically. What does change is the level of personal responsibility we assume for making sure that all aspects of our practice meet applicable professional, ethical, and legal requirements.

For school psychologists in Florida, one of the first things to understand is the authority under which we are practicing. Certification to practice school psychology within the educational system and licensure for the independent practice of school psychology are not the same thing. Understanding our scope of practice, and the requirements and limitations associated with private practice, is essential.

We also need to remain very aware of professional competence. The fact that a particular service may fall within the general scope of school psychology does not necessarily mean that every school psychologist is prepared to provide it. We each have a responsibility to recognize the boundaries of our own education, training, supervised experience, and professional expertise.

Confidentiality, informed consent, documentation, conflicts of interest, advertising, fees, telehealth, assessment practices, and communication of results can all take on additional dimensions when we provide services independently. Depending on the nature and structure of a practice, additional state and federal requirements may also apply.

This is why I encourage school psychologists to approach private practice intentionally. It is not simply school psychology practiced in a different location.

BUILDING A PRACTICE THAT CAN LAST

Starting a private practice is one challenge. Maintaining a successful one is another.

A sustainable practice requires attention to both the quality of our professional services and the business that supports those services. One of the mistakes new practitioners can make is looking at what another psychologist charges and simp-

ly selecting a similar fee. The actual cost of providing a service involves much more.

Assessment materials, scoring systems, professional liability insurance, office expenses, technology, continuing education, licensure, taxes, administrative time, report writing, communication with families and other professionals, and other expenses all affect the true cost of providing services.

Time is especially easy to underestimate. A two-hour evaluation does not represent two hours of professional work. There may also be record review, scoring, interpretation, report writing, feedback, consultation, scheduling, billing, and follow-up. If those hours are not considered when establishing fees and scheduling cases, a practice that appears successful on paper may not actually be sustainable.

I have also learned that a successful private practice is built heavily on professional relationships and reputation. Clear communication, thoughtful evaluations, timely reports, useful recommendations, appropriate professional boundaries, and strong relationships with referral sources contribute significantly to the long-term health of a practice.

Ultimately, private practice requires us to think both as school psychologists and as practice owners. Our professional and ethical responsibilities must always guide our decisions, but we also need systems that allow the practice itself to function effectively.

IS PRIVATE PRACTICE RIGHT FOR YOU?

Private practice is not necessarily the right path for every school psychologist, and it does not need to be an all-or-nothing career decision. For some practitioners, a small part-time practice provides exactly the professional variety and autonomy they are looking for. Others may eventually build a full-time practice, develop a specialty area, expand their services, or create a professional path they had never envisioned when they first began.

For me, private practice has been an important part of my professional journey. Over the years, I have also had the opportunity to help other school psychologists explore private practice and better understand the responsibilities that come with it. One of the things I enjoy most about

these conversations is seeing the range of possibilities that exist within our profession.

The important first step is understanding what private practice really entails, including both its opportunities and its responsibilities.

For school psychologists who are considering private practice, as well as those who already have an established practice, understanding the legal, ethical, practical, and business aspects of independent practice is essential to developing a practice that is professionally sound and sustainable.

I will be presenting a CE/CPD workshop, *Starting and Maintaining a Successful Private Practice in School Psychology: Legal and Ethical Considerations*, on Wednesday morning, October 28, at the FASP Annual Conference.

We will take a closer look at many of these issues, including the legal and ethical foundations of private practice, scope of practice, essential policies and documentation, business considerations, and practical strategies for establishing and maintaining a successful school psychology practice.

Whether you are simply wondering if private practice might be in your future, are preparing to get started, or already have an established practice, I hope you will join me.

AI Disclosure: Generative AI was used to assist with drafting and editing this post. I reviewed and revised the content and take responsibility for its accuracy and final form.

School Psychologist Burnout: Why the Helpers in the Building Wait Too Long for Their Own Care

Martha Fernandez, LCSW, CEREVITY



Here is a composite drawn from common patterns, not any one person. A school psychologist finishes a suicide risk assessment at 2:45, calls the parent, documents the safety plan and walks into a 3:15 eligibility meeting. That night she lies awake running the same screening questions she asked the student, this time on herself. Sleep: poor for weeks. Interest in things she used to enjoy: fading. Patience with her own family: thin. Then she scores herself the way she would never let a colleague score a student: "It's just October."

School psychologists are among the best-trained people in any building at noticing distress. That skill rarely gets pointed inward, and when it does, the verdict is usually "not yet." This article is about that delay: why it happens to helpers in particular, and three concrete ways to shorten it. I am a licensed clinical social worker, not a school psychologist, so please read this as a peer perspective from the therapy side of the referral, not as practice guidance.

School psychologists are among the best-trained people in any building at noticing distress. That skill rarely gets pointed inward, and when it does, the verdict is usually "not yet." This article is about that delay: why it happens to helpers in particular, and three concrete ways to shorten it. I am a licensed clinical social worker, not a school psychologist, so please read this as a peer perspective from the therapy side of the referral, not as practice guidance.

THE LOAD IS NOT IMAGINARY

The NASP 2020 Professional Standards say the ratio should not exceed one school psychologist for every 500 students. NASP's ratio chart for the 2024-25 school year, built

from U.S. Department of Education Common Core of Data, puts the national average at 1,071 students per school psychologist and Florida at 2,075, more than four times the recommended load. NASP labels those figures provisional.

BURNOUT IS COMMON. THE WAIT IS WHAT WE CAN CHANGE.

These pages have already carried good advice on boundaries and on preventing burnout. My focus is narrower: the stretch of time between noticing that something is wrong and actually sitting down with a therapist.

Psychologists are not exempt from that stretch. In a survey of 260 professional psychologists published in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* in 2013, Bearse and colleagues found that burnout was the most frequently reported problem, and that the biggest obstacles to getting psychotherapy were difficulty finding a therapist and lack of time.

The same pattern shows up in other professions that hold everyone else together. In a 2026 CEREVITY review of 307 executives who sought therapy through the CEREVITY network, the median gap between recognizing serious strain and a first session was 21 months, and 58% waited for a crisis before reaching out. Among 297 physicians who sought therapy through the network, the delay was 22 months, and 61% said licensing fears held them back, a pattern CEREVITY describes in its report on [why physicians put off therapy over licensing fears](#). Different

jobs, same mechanism: the more people depend on you, the higher you set the bar for needing help yourself.

WHY THE HELPERS WAIT

Caseload guilt. Every hour spent on your own care feels like an hour a student waits for an evaluation. With a ratio like Florida's, that math is real, which is exactly why it is so persuasive. But the arithmetic runs the other way too. A school psychologist who burns out and leaves takes an entire caseload with her.

The knowledge trap. You teach coping skills. You know the cognitive model, the sleep handout and the grounding exercises. It is easy to conclude that knowing the tools should be enough, and that needing a therapist means you failed to use them. Knowing how a skill works and applying it to yourself while exhausted are different abilities. Nobody sees their own blind spots from the inside.

A small referral world. The therapists in your county are often the people you refer families to, sit beside on community teams or see at the same trainings. Calling one of them for yourself can feel like crossing a line, and sometimes it does cross one.

Credential worry. Like physicians, school psychologists hold credentials they cannot afford to lose, and many quietly wonder whether treatment could surface somewhere that matters. That worry deserves real answers, and it rarely gets them, because it is rarely asked out loud.

THREE MOVES THAT SHORTEN THE WAIT

1. Name your own early-warning sign and a threshold

"I'll get help if it gets bad" fails because "bad" keeps moving. Pick one sign that is specific to you and a threshold that triggers action. For example: "If I write reports on three Sundays in a row." "If I stop answering personal texts for two weeks." "If I find myself hoping every meeting gets canceled." Write it down and tell one person what it is. When the threshold hits, you make the call, even if the week feels manageable. Treat it the way you would treat a student's safety plan: the decision is made in advance so it does not depend on your judgment on your worst day.

This is more than self-care. The NASP Principles for Professional Ethics, part of the 2020 Professional Standards, include Standard II.1.2, which says school psychologists "seek consultation or other assistance when personal problems arise that threaten to compromise their professional effectiveness." Getting help early is part of the professional standard, not an exception to it.

2. Book care outside your district and outside your referral network

The simplest way around the small-world problem is distance. A therapist who is licensed in Florida but has no ties to your schools, the families you serve or your professional circle removes the dual-role worry before it starts, and a video session from home before the first bell or after the last meeting answers the time problem too.

Before the first session, ask four plain questions. What goes into my record? Who can see it? Does anything go to my employer or my insurer? Do you have early-morning or evening times? A vague answer to any of them is useful information.

3. Build peer consultation that covers the clinician, not just the case

Most school psychologists have some form of consultation for hard cases. Far fewer have a standing place where someone asks how the psychologist is doing. Add one question to the consultation you already have. After the case is discussed, someone asks: “How are you carrying this one?” Rotate who asks, so the same person is not always doing the caring. And if you told a colleague your threshold under the first move, this is where they get to hold you to it.

Consultation is not therapy. Its job here is narrower: to notice when a colleague has crossed their own line and say so kindly.

FOR LEAD PSYCHOLOGISTS AND SUPERVISORS

If you lead a team, two things lower the barrier for everyone. First, keep a short list of Florida-licensed therapists outside your district that staff can contact directly, without going through anyone. That takes the top barrier Bearse and colleagues found, difficulty finding a therapist, off the table before it comes up. Second, when someone asks for coverage for a therapy appointment, handle it the way you would handle any medical appointment: no questions, no explanation required.

THE PROCESS YOU ALREADY BUILT

When someone notices that a student is struggling, your building has a process: a screen, a threshold, a plan and a referral. You built much of that process. You are allowed to use it on yourself, and the best time to start is before a crisis makes the decision for you.

REFERENCES

Bearse, J. L., McMinn, M. R., Seegobin, W., & Free, K. (2013). Barriers to psychologists seeking mental health care. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 44(3), 150-157.

CEREVITY. (2026). *61% of physicians delay therapy over licensing or credentialing fears*.

CEREVITY. (2026). *Why executives wait 21 months for therapy*.

National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *The professional standards of the National Association of School Psychologists*.

National Association of School Psychologists. (2026). *Student to school psychologist ratio 2024-2025 [Data chart]*. Data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martha Fernandez, LCSW, is a licensed clinical social worker and co-founder of CEREVITY (cerevity.com), a [private-pay concierge network of independent licensed clinicians](#) built for high achievers: executives, founders, physicians, attorneys and finance leaders. She is the author of *Wired to Burn: A Therapist's Guide for High Achievers Running on Fumes*.

Beyond “Dopamine Withdrawal”: How Digital Reward Cycles Are Shaping Student Behavior in Schools

Nina Messer, Psy.S., NCSP, Licensed School Psychologist

BACKGROUND

School psychologists, educators, and parents increasingly describe students as being “addicted” to screens or experiencing “dopamine withdrawal” when access to technology is disrupted or limited. While dopamine withdrawal is not a recognized clinical diagnosis in the DSM-5, current research suggests that excessive engagement with highly stimulating digital activities, such as social media, video games, streaming content, and short-form videos, can impact attention, motivation, emotional regulation, and behavior in ways that affect school functioning. Recent studies indicate associations between excessive screen use and increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, executive functioning difficulties, and reduced academic engagement among adolescents. Researchers have also found that digital environments are designed around reward mechanisms which capitalize on the brain's sensitivity to novelty, social feedback, and intermittent reinforcement. This article reviews recent research, examines how digital reward cycles may manifest in school settings, discusses implications for virtual education, and offers practical recommendations for school psychologists working with students, families, and educators.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers describe students who appear unable to tolerate boredom; become frustrated when academic tasks require sustained effort; and seem constantly distracted by digital devices. Parents report emotional outbursts when screens/devices are removed, and difficulties motivating children to engage in non-digital activities. School psychologists may be asked whether students are experiencing a form of “dopamine withdrawal” or a “dopamine addiction.”

Although these phrases have become popular

in social media discussions and parenting forums, the science is nuanced. Dopamine is not a “pleasure chemical” that can simply be depleted from the brain. Rather, dopamine functions as a neurotransmitter involved in motivation, reward anticipation, learning, and reinforcement. Researchers have increasingly examined how modern digital platforms capitalize on these reward processes, potentially affecting attention, self-regulation, and behavioral patterns among children and adolescents (Chiu & Chein, 2022).

For school psychologists, understanding the relationship between student behavior and digital reward systems is increasingly important. Whether students attend traditional schools, homeschool, or virtual programs, technology has become deeply integrated into daily life. Consequently, difficulties related to attention, emotional regulation, task persistence, sleep, and executive functioning may be influenced by patterns of digital engagement (Nesi et al., 2020).

UNDERSTANDING DOPAMINE: SEPARATING SCIENCE FROM POPULAR CULTURE

Popular media frequently defines dopamine as the brain's “feel good chemical.” Alternatively, modern neuroscience has found that dopamine's primary role involves motivation, learning, reward prediction, and behavioral reinforcement rather than pleasure alone. When one anticipates a rewarding experience, the brain's dopamine activity increases, helping motivate behavior toward obtaining that reward (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Tereshchenko, 2023).

Digital platforms are especially effective at engaging reward pathways because they deliver unpredictable and intermittent rewards. For example, a student scrolling through social

media may occasionally encounter an exciting video; earn a gaming reward; receive a message from a friend; or receive attention/social validation through likes, comments, etc. Because these rewards occur unpredictably, users often continually check their devices in anticipation of the next rewarding experience. This process resembles reinforcement schedules long recognized in behavioral psychology as highly effective ways of maintaining behavior (Maza et al., 2023; Tereshchenko, 2023).

Presently, there is limited scientific support for the idea that students are experiencing actual "dopamine withdrawal" when separated from screens and devices. Conversely, researchers more commonly discuss problematic social media and internet use, behavioral addictions, and sensitivity to reward systems. These frameworks provide a more accurate and evidence-based understanding of the behaviors educators may observe in school environments (Darvesh et al., 2020; Tereshchenko, 2023).

WHAT RECENT RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT DIGITAL MEDIA USE

The past five years have produced a growing body of research examining the relationships between adolescent mental health and digital media use. While findings are often complex and correlational rather than causal, several consistent themes have emerged.

A 2023 systematic review published in *BMC Psychology* examined 50 studies investigating screen time and adolescent mental health. The authors found that excessive screen exposure was frequently associated with increased mental health concerns, poorer mental well-being, and elevated risk for depressive symptoms, particularly among youth that heavily engage with social media platforms. Smartphones were reported to be the most frequently used device among adolescents, and excessive use was linked to reduced well-being (Santos et al., 2023).

Similarly, a 2024 study involving around 1,000 adolescents found significant relationships be-

tween symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress and screen time. Youth reporting four to six hours of daily screen use demonstrated higher levels of mental health symptoms than peers with lower levels of screen exposure. Students reporting six or more hours showed even greater symptom levels. Researchers concluded that adolescents spending more than four hours per day engaged with screens may require additional attention (Francisquini et al., 2024).

Researchers noted that screen time itself, however, may not be the sole contributing factor. Other factors such as the reasons for using technology, individual vulnerabilities, family factors, the content being consumed, and preexisting mental health concerns can influence outcomes. As a result, it is important to avoid simplistic conclusions that all screen use is harmful while continuing to recognize that excessive or problematic use can contribute to meaningful difficulties (Nesi et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2023).

THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN AND DIGITAL REWARDS

Adolescence represents a period of heightened sensitivity to rewards and social feedback. Brain regions involved in emotion, motivation, and reward processing mature earlier than areas responsible for self-regulation and executive control. This developmental mismatch can lead to heightened responsiveness to rewarding experiences while self-control skills are still developing (Nesi et al., 2020).

Social media platforms take advantage of this developmental sensitivity through likes, notifications, comments, shares, and other forms of social feedback. In Maze et al.'s 2023 longitudinal study published by *JAMA Pediatrics*, researchers found that adolescents who frequently checked social media demonstrated distinct patterns of brain development over time, particularly within networks associated with emotional significance, cognitive control, and reward sensitivity. The authors suggested that habitual social media checking may be linked to increased sensitivity to social rewards

and punishments across adolescence (Maza et al., 2023).

These findings do not confirm that social media causes neurological harm. Nevertheless, they suggest that continual engagement with highly rewarding digital experiences may shape how adolescents respond to social feedback and reinforcement. Because adolescence is already characterized by heightened concern about peer approval and belonging, digital environments can become particularly powerful behavioral influences (Maza et al., 2023; Nesi et al., 2020).

WHAT SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS MAY OBSERVE IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

The practical question for school psychologists is how these reward-related processes may manifest in schools.

Educators increasingly report that students struggle to maintain attention during less stimulating activities. Tasks requiring reading, writing, problem-solving, or delayed gratification may appear less rewarding when compared to rapidly changing digital content. This may lead students to become frustrated more quickly, prematurely abandon tasks, or to constantly seek external stimulation. These behaviors may be interpreted as lack of motivation or laziness, when they may instead reflect difficulty adjusting from high-intensity digital rewards to slower academic demands (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Maza et al., 2023).

School psychologists and educators may observe behaviors such as:

- Frequent device checking
- Difficulty initiating non-preferred tasks
- Reduced frustration tolerance
- Increased complaints about boredom
- Task-switching and multitasking
- Difficulty sustaining attention
- Behavioral challenges (e.g., irritability) when access to technology is restricted

- Reduced persistence during challenging work

These behaviors do not necessarily indicate “addiction,” but instead may represent learned patterns of reward-seeking and reinforcement that interfere with academic functioning (Maza et al., 2023; Tereshchenko, 2023).

It is important to note that such behaviors can overlap with symptoms associated with ADHD, anxiety disorders, depression, sleep deprivation, trauma, and other mental health conditions. School psychologists and educators should therefore avoid assuming that technology use alone is responsible for student difficulties and instead adopt a comprehensive evaluation approach (Falcione & Weber, 2025; Santos et al., 2023).

IMPLICATIONS FOR VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

This discussion becomes especially relevant within virtual learning environments. Traditional schools typically provide some separation between educational activities and entertainment. Students attend classrooms where technology access is supervised or may be restricted. In contrast, learners in virtual school programs often complete coursework on the same devices that provide access to social media, streaming platforms, online gaming, messaging applications, etc. This creates a unique challenge in which educational tasks constantly compete against highly rewarding digital alternatives (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Nesi et al., 2020).

Virtual school educators often encounter students who report spending hours online yet struggle to complete relatively brief academic assignments. Parents and educators alike may become confused by this discrepancy, assuming that extensive computer use should translate into academic productivity. However, research has found that there are very different cognitive demands when passively consuming highly stimulating content versus actively engagement in academic learning (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Santos et al., 2023).

In virtual education settings, school psychologists and educators may observe:

- Difficulty transitioning into coursework
- Chronic procrastination and increased academic avoidance
- Frequent attendance concerns
- Multitasking during lessons
- Reduced assignment completion
- Sleep-related issues impacting performance

The challenge is not necessarily the amount of time a student spends online, but rather the competition between educational responsibilities and digital experiences designed to maximize engagement and reward (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Nesi et al., 2020).

SLEEP, ATTENTION, AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

One of the strongest pathways linking excessive technology use to school functioning involves sleep.

Students who engage with digital devices late into the evening may have difficulty falling asleep, have reduced sleep duration, and experience poorer sleep quality. Sleep deprivation is associated with impaired attention, executive functioning difficulties, increased emotional reactivity, and reduced academic performance. Therefore, some school-related concerns attributed to technology may reflect secondary effects of insufficient sleep (Francisquini et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2023).

Furthermore, emotional regulation difficulties may emerge when students become accustomed to immediate digital stimulation. Rapid feedback and entertainment are provided in the forms of social media scrolling, gaming, and short-form videos. In contrast, academic

activities generally require sustained effort and delayed rewards. Students accustomed to rapid reward cycles may consequently experience greater frustration when faced with challenging school tasks (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Maza et al., 2023).

For school psychologists, this highlights the importance of examining environmental influences, lifestyle factors, sleep habits, and technology routines alongside academic and behavioral concerns.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY USE AND MENTAL HEALTH

One overlooked, yet important, aspect of the literature is that the relationship between technology use and mental health appears bidirectional.

Research has shown that excessive digital engagement may contribute to emotional difficulties. Simultaneously, students who experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, social rejection, or other psychological challenges may be more likely to seek connection, comfort, or distraction through digital platforms (Nesi et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2023).

A study by Falcione and Weber (2025) examining gaming disorder in adolescents provides an important picture. Researchers found that preexisting psychological difficulties were predictive of later development of gaming disorder symptoms, whereas gaming disorder did not appear to cause worsening psychopathology over time. These findings suggest that underlying emotional and behavioral concerns may sometimes precede rather than result from problematic digital engagement (Falcione & Weber, 2025).

This distinction is critically important, as overemphasizing technology as the cause of emotional and/or behavioral difficulties may lead

professionals and families to overlook more significant underlying needs. A comprehensive assessment should explore developmental factors, emotional and behavioral functioning, family stressors, social relationships, and academic experiences in conjunction with technology use patterns (Falcione & Weber, 2025; Santos et al., 2023).

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists are uniquely positioned to support healthy technology habits while promoting self-regulation skills.

1. Educate Rather Than Alarm

Students and families often encounter sensationalized information about dopamine addiction and brain damage. Thus, providing balanced and evidence-based education can encourage healthy technology practices while helping to reduce fear. It's important to emphasize that most students use technology without developing significant impairment, but that some youth may experience difficulties related to excessive or problematic use (Darvesh et al., 2020; Tereshchenko, 2023).

2. Assess Functional Impact

Rather than focusing exclusively on the amount of screen time, evaluate whether technology use is affecting academic performance, relationships, sleep, mental health, or daily functioning. Functional impairment is generally a more meaningful assessment target than total hours of use (Darvesh et al., 2020; Tereshchenko, 2023).

3. Promote Self-Regulation Skills

Students benefit from explicit instruction in:

- Goal-setting
- Time management
- Self-monitoring

- Delayed gratification
- Emotional regulation
- Task persistence

These skills support academic success regardless of technology use patterns. (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Nesi et al., 2020).

4. Encourage Environmental Supports

Environmental modifications can be more impactful than willpower alone. Examples include:

- Device-free homework periods
- Scheduled breaks
- Notification management (e.g., limiting the number of notifications from digital applications)
- Consistent bedtime routines
- Structured workspaces
- Parent monitoring systems, when appropriate

These supports reduce opportunities for distraction while promoting healthy habits (Naik et al., 2025; Santos et al., 2023).

5. Increase Access to Natural Rewards

Students benefit from experiences that provide slower yet meaningful forms of reinforcement, including:

- Sports
- Music
- Art
- Clubs
- Volunteer activities
- Face-to-face social interaction
- Outdoor recreation

Such activities can enhance emotional well-being while expanding sources of motivation

beyond digital environments. (Naik et al., 2025; Nesi et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The concept of "dopamine withdrawal" has become a popular explanation for many behavior concerns among students, yet the scientific reality is more complex. Current research does not support the existence of a formal dopamine withdrawal syndrome related to routine technology use. However, a growing body of research suggests that modern digital environments may influence attention, motivation, emotional regulation, reward processing, and behavioral functioning, with important implications for student learning and school success (Darvesh et al., 2020; Tereshchenko, 2023).

School psychologists are observing the consequences of these changes every day. Students may struggle with boredom, motivation, task persistence, frustration tolerance, self-regulation, sleep difficulties, etc. While these concerns can occur across educational settings, virtual schools face unique obstacles because learning and digital distractions coexist within the same online environment (Chiu & Chein, 2022; Nesi et al., 2020).

Instead of framing student difficulties as evidence of dopamine addiction, school psychologists can play a critical role in helping educators and families understand the interaction between adolescent development, digital technology, mental health, and learning. By promoting balanced technology use, strengthening self-regulation skills, and addressing underlying emotional and behavioral needs, professionals can help students navigate an increasingly digital world while maintaining academic success and psychological well-being (Maza et al., 2023; Nesi et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2023).

REFERENCES

- Chiu, M., & Chein, J. (2022). Digital media and the developing brain. In J. Nesi, E. H. Telzer, & M. J. Prinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent digital media use and mental health* (pp. 104-134). Cambridge University Press.
- Darvesh, N., Radhakrishnan, A., Lachance, C. C., Nincic, V., Sharpe, J. P., Ghassemi, M., Straus, S. E., & Tricco, A. C. (2020). Exploring the prevalence of gaming disorder and Internet gaming disorder: A rapid scoping review. *Systematic Reviews*, 9(1), Article 68. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01329-2>
- Falcione, K., & Weber, R. (2025). Psychopathology and gaming disorder in adolescents. *JAMA Network Open*, 8(7), e2528532. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.28532>
- Francisquini, M. C. J., Silva, T. M. S., Santos, G. C. D., Barbosa, R. O., Dias, P. H. G., Ruiz, A. B., Silva, J. M. D., & Stabelini Neto, A. (2024). Associations of screen time with symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression in adolescents. *Revista Paulista de Pediatria*, 43, e2023250. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-0462/2025/43/2023250>
- Maza, M. T., Fox, K. A., Kwon, S., Humphreys, K. L., McLaughlin, K. A., Sheridan, M. A., Shapiro, M., & Nagel, B. J. (2023). Association of habitual checking behaviors on social media with longitudinal functional brain development. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 177(2), 160-167. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.4924>
- Naik, V. S., Mathias, E. G., Krishnan, P., & Jagannath, V. (2025). Impact of social media on cognitive development of children and young adults: A systematic review. *BMC Pediatrics*, 25(1), 826. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-025-06041-5>
- Nesi, J., Telzer, E. H., & Prinstein, M. J. (2020). Adolescent development in the digital media context. *Psychological Inquiry*, 31(3), 229-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2020.1820219>
- Santos, R. M. S., Mendes, C. G., Sen Bressani, G. Y., de Alcantara Ventura, S., de Almeida Nogueira, Y. J., de Miranda, D. M., & Romano-Silva, M. A. (2023). The associations between screen time and mental health in adolescents: A systematic review. *BMC Psychology*, 11(1), 127. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01166-7>
- Tereshchenko, S. Y. (2023). Neurobiological risk factors for problematic social media use as a specific form of Internet addiction: A narrative review. *World Journal of Psychiatry*, 13(5), 160-173. <https://doi.org/10.5498/wjp.v13.i5.160>

Beyond Stickers: Finding Meaningful Reinforcers Through the Premack Principle

Wayne D. Rosenfield, Ph.D., National Louis University

A psychologist who has ever attempted to write a meaningful behavioral plan has encountered the problem of identifying an effective reinforcer. An effective, positive reinforcer is required. We know that. But then the next step—identifying a behavioral consequence to serve that role—can be as hard as it is essential. I will show you where such reinforcing consequences are hiding in plain sight and the underlying behavioral principle behind them.

Operant conditioning helps explain how what happens after a behavior affects whether that behavior is likely to occur again. In our work as school psychologists, we usually apply these principles with children and adolescents. But I learned about operant conditioning in small organisms, specifically *Rattus norvegicus*, the laboratory rats that are the second most common subjects in psychological research. College students have also contributed generously to our understanding of psychology (Sears, 1986), although course credit tends to be more appealing to them than food pellets.

In the laboratory, food could serve as a consequence for a rat's bar-press response. The opportunity to engage in a higher-probability behavior, such as eating when hungry, could reinforce a lower-probability behavior, such as pressing the bar.

The difficulty in getting children to eat broccoli is legendary. Broccoli is a cruciferous inflorescence, for those who prefer their vegetables with a botanical introduction. Whatever we call it, eating broccoli may be a low-probability behavior for the child sitting across the dinner table. The question is what that particular child would rather be doing and whether the opportunity to do it might make the broccoli more appealing.

The behavioral challenge is familiar. We want a student to perform a behavior that is not particularly attractive to them. Perhaps it is completing an assignment, staying in the classroom, practicing a social skill, beginning a task, or simply doing something other than what the student would prefer to do (persisting with something difficult). For the sake of this discussion, we will assume that the student has the skills and support needed to perform the behavior and that an adequate operational definition of the desired behavior has already been developed.

Once we have operationally defined the behavior we want to increase, the next question becomes:

“What can we give the student for doing it?”

Sometimes the answer is obvious. A child might work for a sticker, a piece of candy, computer time, praise, or a token that can later be exchanged for something desirable. These consequences may be useful, but their effectiveness depends on the individual student and the context.

It may also be true that some students appear to have no interest in the usual reinforcers. Some of them have access to so many competing activities that a token, sticker, or verbal compliment has about as much motivational value as a coupon for something they never wanted in the first place. (I once received a discount coupon promising \$2,000 off the list price of some cognitive remediation software. That was a hard “No!”)

(continued on next page)

This is where the Premack Principle becomes particularly useful.

THE PREMACK PRINCIPLE

The basic idea is wonderfully simple: **A behavior that occurs with higher probability can be used to reinforce a behavior that occurs with lower probability (Premack, 1959).** This principle was applied with nursery school children more than six decades ago (Homme et al., 1963). In other words, instead of inventing a reward, look for something the person already wants to do, whose access you control. An activity the student frequently chooses is a promising potential reinforcer. Its effectiveness must be confirmed by observing whether access to it increases the future occurrence of that behavior (Fisher et al., 1992). If a student spends every available moment playing a particular computer game, then access to that game may be used as a consequence for completing a less-preferred task:

“First math, then Minecraft.”

If a student loves talking to a particular adult, that interaction might become contingent upon completing another activity:

“After you complete these three math problems, we can spend five minutes discussing your favorite dinosaurs.”

If a student wants to draw, listen to music, look at sports statistics, discuss dinosaurs, watch videos, or engage in some other activity with unusual persistence, that activity may have considerably greater reinforcing power than anything the adults have thought to offer.

The critical question is not necessarily, **“What does this student like?”**

Rather, the question is, **“What does this student reliably do when nobody is making him do anything else?”**

That is a much more interesting question. And sometimes, it produces much more useful answers.

LOOK FOR THE BEHAVIOR THAT IS ALREADY HAPPENING.

One advantage of the Premack Principle is that it makes the student's own behavior part of the assessment and increases the chances of a successful intervention. Suppose a student refuses to complete a worksheet but immediately picks up a drawing pencil whenever given the opportunity. The pencil is not merely an object that the student says he likes. Drawing is a behavior that occurs more frequently than completing a worksheet.

The behavioral intervention can therefore be constructed around an existing preference:

Complete a small amount of the worksheet → draw for a specified period.

Then perhaps later:

Complete more of the worksheet → draw for a little longer.

The important feature is the contingency. The drawing is not just something the student gets regardless of what happens. Access to the high-frequency behavior follows the lower-frequency behavior. This is also why we should be cautious about simply asking students what they want to identify as reinforcers. What people report liking and what they actually choose when given competing alternatives are not always the same thing. Observing behavior provides the psychologist with information to develop a behavior plan that is immediately

actionable, readily available, low-cost, and non-caloric.

FINDING WHAT WORKS FOR THE STUDENT.

There are plenty of reasons why a behavior plan would not be successful. And a school psychologist has probably already heard the reasons given for not trying, which may include “Nothing works,” “We tried that,” or “I do not have time to experiment.”

In response, the psychologist should take a deep breath and internally say:

“Let’s revisit the student’s preferences, the task demands, and how the plan is being implemented.” You can abandon the question, “What can I give this student to induce his behavior?”

Instead, the questions can be:

1. What does this student do frequently when given a choice?
2. What activity does the student try to return to?
3. What can the student talk about indefinitely?
4. What does the student do without prompting?
5. What activity competes successfully with the behavior I am trying to establish?

That last question is my favorite, and it may be particularly revealing. If a student will abandon almost anything to get back to YouTube (under supervision, of course!), drawing, talking with a particular peer, looking at sports statistics, building with LEGO, or playing a particular game, you have just learned something important about the student’s behavioral repertoire and what motivates him.

You may have found your reinforcer.

START SMALL

There is another lesson related to the Premack Principle that is particularly important in practice. If the desired behavior is occurring at almost zero frequency or duration, start small.

A student who rarely completes an assignment may not suddenly become willing to complete 45 minutes of difficult work because the reward at the end is something wonderful. Start with something the student can actually do. A small amount of low-frequency behavior can become high-frequency behavior. Gradually increase the requirement as the desired behavior becomes more established.

In behavioral terms, we are not asking the student to leap from “never” to “always.” We are arranging the environment so that performing a small amount of the desired behavior provides access to something the student already values. Recall that behavioral shaping involves progressing through a sequence of successive approximations of the goal. Success may take a while, but slow success is still better than no success.

THE REINFORCER IS DETERMINED BY WHAT HAPPENS.

A reinforcer is not a reinforcer because the psychologist thinks it should be. A reinforcer is not a reinforcer because it is printed on a commercially available behavior chart. And a reinforcer is not necessarily a reinforcer because the student says it is.

A reinforcer is a reinforcer if its contingent presentation increases the future occurrence of the behavior. That means we have to pay attention to what actually happens. If the student does not work for the promised reward, perhaps the reward is not reinforcing, the task is too difficult, the contingency is too delayed, the student has access to the supposedly valu-

able activity at other times, or we identified a high-frequency behavior that is being maintained by a contingency we have not considered. Or maybe our behavioral plan makes perfect sense on paper and has very little value to the staff person who is supposed to carry it out.

TRY THIS TOMORROW

Pick one student whose behavior plan is not working.

Do not begin by asking what reward you can give the student. Instead, watch what the student chooses to do when given the opportunity.

What behavior occurs repeatedly?

What does the student try to return to?

What will the student work to gain access to?

You may have just found your reinforcer.

WHAT ABOUT THE BROCCOLI?

Suppose I tell a child, **“Eat your broccoli, and then you can have more broccoli.”**

I did not create an effective behavioral intervention. Suppose, however, that I discover that the child likes apple pie. Now I have something to work with. The broccoli remains broccoli, but the behavioral arrangement has changed. And that is the essential lesson of the Premack Principle.

When I learned about this idea in a psychology course, it already made sense to me from my experiences eating at my grandmother’s

house. She had two apple trees in the backyard and made an amazing apple pie. And she knew about how to arrange the behavioral contingencies on her dining room table to get broccoli into the grandchildren.

We do not necessarily need to invent reinforcers. The environment is already full of them, and the student is telling us what they are. We have to pay attention to the message.

REFERENCES

Fisher, W., Piazza, C. C., Bowman, L. G., Hagopian, L. P., Owens, J. C., & Slevin, I. (1992). A comparison of two approaches for identifying reinforcers for persons with severe and profound disabilities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 25(2), 491–498. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1992.25-491>

Homme, L. E., DeBaca, P. C., Devine, J. V., Steinhorst, R., & Rickert, E. J. (1963). Use of the Premack principle in controlling the behavior of nursery school children. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 6(4), 544. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jeab.1963.6-544>

Premack, D. (1959). Toward empirical behavior laws: I. Positive reinforcement. *Psychological Review*, 66(4), 219–233. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040891>

Sears, D. O. (1986). College sophomores in the laboratory: Influences of a narrow data base on social psychology’s view of human nature. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(3), 515–530. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.51.3.515>

School Psychologists and the Department of Juvenile Justice

Catherine R. Carpenter, Student, Florida State University

The state of Florida has implemented changes in their approach to the juvenile justice system but has, in many ways, overlooked educational attainment. Instead of harsh punishment for first-time offenders, they are now given diversion programs or probation instead of incarceration. As the state makes this transition, they boast a 67% reduction in juveniles being confined to secure facilities and an 84% decline in residential placement at the end of 2022 (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2023b, pp. 7-8).

While this new program lowers incarceration rates, it places greater demands on teachers, school administrators, and school psychologists who are often not trained to deal with the unique needs of this population (Gagnon & Swank, 2021). Not only are these youth hampered by their living situations, but they will not have the same level of academic achievement as their peers. When students return to school, they have tremendous academic, emotional, and social needs. If school psychologists, teachers, and administrators cannot meet them where they are at, they stand a great likelihood of suspensions, expulsions, and going to prison as adults (Cauffman et al., 2024). As school psychologists, it is important to keep in mind that completion of high school lowers juvenile recidivism by more than 43% (Gagnon et al., 2022).

When the topic of juvenile justice is discussed, adolescents come to mind. The school-to-prison pipeline conjures ideas of high school age offenders. While it is true that most students enmeshed with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice are over the age of 12 (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice [FDJJ], 2024a; FDJJ, 2024b; FDJJ, 2024c; FDJJ, 2024d; FDJJ, 2024e), they are not the only ones.

The federal courts have not placed a mini-

mum age of arrest on children (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2024). While this article focuses on the state of Florida, the issues presented are not unique to this state. The OJJDP (2024) stated that 60% of states do not have a minimum age of arrest. The *Kaia Rolle Act (2021)* says that a child in Florida cannot be charged or detained before the age of 7. There is a caveat to this statute. If the crime is a “forcible felony,” meaning that there is a degree of physical violence, then the age minimum no longer applies.

Children in Florida as young as five years old have been taken into custody through the Baker Act or arrested for criminal offenses. To recognize the scope of the matter, it requires delving into various publications. There are some discrepancies and missing data since the statistics are not consolidated into a single report.

One cannot simply look at the number of children in secure custody, which in the 2023/2024 fiscal year was one child under the age of seven and 135 children between the ages of eight and eleven (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice [FDJJ], 2024c). There are five separate Comprehensive Accountability Reports published by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. Each contains unique data points. In the combined reports of *Civil Citations and Other Alternatives to Arrest, Delinquency Intake, Detention Services, Probation Services, and Residential Services*, there were more than 1,400 Children eleven years old and younger involved with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (FDJJ, 2024a; FDJJ, 2024b; FDJJ, 2024c; FDJJ, 2024d; FDJJ, 2024e). These numbers do not include all youths with police contact, since those who are involuntarily committed for mental health services are brought there by the police.

Thousands of children undergo involuntary

psychiatric examinations and are placed in psychiatric facilities under the Florida Mental Health Act (2025). These statutes are commonly known as the “Baker Act.” Again, there are no minimum age requirement to have a child escorted by law enforcement to be evaluated. Florida statute 394.492 of the Florida Mental Health Act (2025) defines a child as “a person from birth until the person’s 13th birthday.” Under this same statute, law enforcement is required to provide transportation. Even though the police are required to take a child into custody, the data points for being so-called “Baker Acted,” does not fall under the purview of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. This is under the jurisdiction of the Florida Department of Children and Families. During the fiscal year of 2022/2023, there were 2,925 children between the ages of five and ten years old that received involuntary psychiatric examinations, and 10,996 children between the ages of 11 and 13 (Florida Department of Children and Families & University of South Florida, 2023).

Within Florida the Mobile Response Team (MRT) can be called to assist with “a behavioral health crisis” (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2025). While not all schools use them, it is important to note that the MRT responded to 3,345 calls on school grounds during the 2023/2024 school year (University of South Florida, 2025).

This is a call to awareness for school psychologists. These behavioral and mental health issues are not relegated to high schools. Children as young as kindergarten are being arrested and Baker Acted across the state of Florida, and they are also part of the school community. There are numerous moving parts in each life of a child that is or was incarcerated. There are the typical components of school, therapies, family, and community. The collaboration with the judicial system is another part for these students. It is also an opportunity for advocacy and systemwide change.

In 2014, the United States Department of Education (DOE) and the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) worked to address the issues of education in the juvenile justice fa-

cilities. Together they published the “Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Setting” (United States Departments of Education and Justice [DOE/J], 2014). The established five principles are as follows:

I. A safe, healthy facility-wide climate that prioritizes education...

II. Necessary funding to support educational opportunities...comparable to opportunities for peers who are not system-involved.

III. Recruitment, employment, and retention of qualified education staff... [who can] create and sustain effective teaching and learning environments.

IV. Rigorous and relevant curricula aligned with state academic... that promote college- and career-readiness.

V. Formal processes and procedures... that ensure successful navigation... and smooth reentry into communities (DOE/J, 2014, p. iv)."

There are opportunities for school psychologists to work to implement these recommendations in school that align with the NASP domains of practice and ethics code. First, school psychologists can promote the prioritization of high-quality education (Principle I). Hunter et al. (2022) investigated the education provided for juvenile offenders and found that the curriculum did not offer enough science or mathematics to pass a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). There have only been eight research studies conducted since 2014 to assess the quality of their education. Five evaluated literacy and three were based on instruction; however, none were focused on STEM education (Gagnon et al., 2022; Hunter et al., 2022). A survey of 17 facilities found that 46 teachers developed their own curricula for their students (Hunter et al., 2022, p.419).

The quality of education in juvenile justice facilities is further illustrated by the 48 class action suits brought against the Department of Justice for “inadequate education ...for incarcerated youth” over the past 50 years (Gagnon, et al., 2022). Settlements in Maine

and Connecticut were reached with the DOJ in 2022. More recently in 2024, there were statewide investigation in Kentucky and Texas for failing to provide appropriate education for juveniles that were detained.

Based on the scarcity of literature and findings of inadequate educational quality, more research needs to be conducted on the quality of this population's access to high-quality instruction and instructional materials. With no research available for STEM, or teachers creating their own material, these standards are not being met. There is not a central government agency that regulates the educational standards of incarcerated youth (Gagnon et al., 2022). This requires further investigation.

This is relevant to school psychologists because when a student returns to school, there needs to be an awareness of the level of education they did not receive while in confinement. Additionally, it provides the school psychologist the opportunity to collect data since it is not provided by the Department of Juvenile Justice (NASP, 2020, Domain 1). Students involved with the juvenile justice system have experienced a culture that is unlike others. There must be an understanding of this social construct since their academic skills are hampered by absenteeism and other mitigating factors (NASP, 2020, Domain 3). Diverse student populations include those students with court involvement. Social justice is at the heart of students entangled with juvenile justice system (NASP, 2020, Domain 8).

Second, school psychologists can promote educational opportunities for all youth. Principle II states that systems will provide the "necessary funding to support educational opportunities for all youths ... comparable to opportunities for peers who are not system-involved" (DOE/J, 2014, p. iv). Financial data, like educational status, is not reported to a central source. Therefore, there are no reports available that analyze how the funds are being appropriated (Gagnon, et al., 2022). With substandard education, teacher created curriculum, insufficient staffing, and professional development lacking, it is difficult to imagine that "necessary funding" is being achieved. While the finances of the DOJ might not fall

directly within the purview of a school psychologist's role, there remains the need to communicate effectively. Collaboration is part of NASP Domain 2: Consultation and Collaboration. A school psychologist could work with teachers and administration for the betterment of the school, staff, and students. Additionally, Domain 8: Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations and Domain 10: Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice points to the importance of advocacy and the assurance that students have what is needed to support them. Effective advocacy would be enhanced by understanding the financial resources provided or available for these students.

Third, school psychologists can become involved with the Department of Juvenile Justice to advocate and work with the current system. Principle III states "recruitment, employment, and retention of qualified education staff with skills relevant in juvenile justice settings... create and sustain effective teaching and learning environments" (DOE/J, 2014, p. iv). This has been grossly unmet. Correctional officers (CO) spend the greatest amount of time with the juveniles in detention. A national survey revealed that 88% of agencies require that a CO have a high school diploma (Gagnon & Swank, 2021). Teaching assistants in the juvenile justice system were only required to have a GED 80% of the time. Personal development for correctional officers, teachers, and assistants was typically limited to one day each year, with a 30% attendance rate (Gagnon & Swank, 2021).

This is an area that requires the skills of a school psychologist. Domain 5: School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning directly addresses this issue: "School psychologists, in collaboration with others, develop and implement practices and strategies to create and maintain safe, effective, and supportive learning environments for students and school staff" (NASP, 2020). Domain 4: Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions focuses on the necessity to implement evidence-based practices that address the mental, emotional, and behavioral issues of students. Those who are involved with the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJJ) will have unique needs in all these areas. Domain 6: Services to

Promote Safe and Supportive Schools works to create an environment that is safe for learning. When the people who monitor, correct, and teach them are not trained for the population, greater harm can come, even if harm is not intended. School psychologists must keep these facts must be kept in mind when students return to public school system.

Fourth, as school psychologists, it is our responsibility to understand the diverse needs of the students we serve. Not all of them will continue to obtain college degrees; however, there are alternative. Principle IV emphasizes the need for “rigorous and relevant curricula aligned with state academic and career and technical education...that promote college- and career-readiness” (DOE/J, 2014, p. iv). Most states do not have formal partnerships with external education agencies, like community colleges or trade schools (Agus-Kleinman et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2022; Hunter et al., 2022). Only 2 of the 50 states use all the federal grants available to them for juvenile offenders’ educational needs in workforce development (Agus-Kleinman, et al., 2019). By implementing Domain 8: Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations of the NASP Domains of Practice, school psychologists can assist students with preparation for alternative educational avenues such as trade schools.

Finally, as school psychologists we have a responsibility to evaluate how our schools are addressing the unique needs of students who have been involved with the courts and/or law enforcement. Principle V states that “formal processes and procedures [would] ensure successful navigation across child-serving systems and smooth reentry into communities.” (DOE/J, 2014, p. iv). It is unlikely, given the difficulties that many students had when they entered the juvenile justice system, that they would thrive or excel in their education. While incarcerated, what is offered to them in way of learning does not meet the same standards as those who are not institutionalized.

This is another area that requires research and implementation of school psychologists’ skills. Domain 9 states that school psychologists “evaluate and apply research as a foundation for service delivery and, in collaboration with

others, use various techniques and technology resources for data collection, measurement, and analysis to support effective practices at the individual, group, and/or systems levels” (NASP, 2020). There are many questions that need to be asked and answered. What systems are in place in Florida school districts to ensure the “smooth reentry” for this population of students? When given standardized tests what are the areas that these students need more support? Where do they fall behind in relation as their peers? What systems, or evidence-based practices, need to be put into place to have better outcomes? There are many other questions and data points that should be investigated. There are gaps between the Department of Education and the Department of Juvenile Justice. As school psychologists, we can be that bridge.

It is not solely directed for the benefit of the students, though: “While equality ensures that all children have the same access to general and special educational opportunities, equity ensures that each student receives what they need to benefit from these opportunities” (NASP, 2020, Domain 8). There needs to be a holistic approach that addresses the needs of parents and “facilitate family and school partnerships and interactions with community agencies to enhance academic and social-behavioral outcomes for children” (NASP, 2020, Domain 7). The school staff needs the tools and support to effectively work with this population. Not only can these needs be met, effect change, but as school psychologists, we have an obligation to implement the NASP Domains of Practice for these students (NASP, 2020, Domain 10).

REFERENCES

Agus-Kleinman, J., Salomon, N., Weber, J., Justice Center, Issuing Body, & United States. Bureau Of Justice Assistance, Sponsoring Body. (2019). *On track: How well are states preparing youth in the juvenile justice system for employment. The Council of State Governments, Justice Center.* <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/Gpo126496>

Cauffman, E., Beardslee, J., Sbeglia, C., Frick, P. J., & Steinberg, L. (2024). Trajectories of offending over 9 years after youths’ first arrest: What predicts who desists and who continues to offend? *Journal Of*

Research On Adolescence, 34(4), 1312–1325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/Jora.12926>

Florida Department of Children and Families. (2025). *Baker Act resources for individuals & families*. <https://www.myflfamilies.com/crisis-services/baker-act/baker-act-resources-individuals-families>

Florida Department of Children and Families & University of South Florida. (2023, November 1). *Report on involuntary examination of minors*. https://www.usf.edu/cbcs/baker-act/documents/ba_minors_report_nov2023.pdf

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2023). *Pathway to impact*. Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. https://www.djj.state.fl.us/content/download/740762/file/PathwayReport_final.pdf

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2024a). *Civil citations and other alternatives to arrest*. Comprehensive accountability report. <https://www.djj.state.fl.us/content/download/1298823/file/%282023-24%20CAR%29%20Civil%20Citation%20-%20Final.pdf?version=1>

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2024b). *Delinquency intake*. Comprehensive accountability report. <https://www.djj.state.fl.us/content/download/1298827/file/%282023-24%20CAR%29%20Intake%20-%20Final.pdf?version=1>

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2024c). *Detention services*. Comprehensive accountability report. <https://www.djj.state.fl.us/content/download/1298824/file/%282023-24%20CAR%29%20Detention%20-%20Final.pdf?version=1>

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2024d). *Probation services*. Comprehensive accountability report. <https://www.djj.state.fl.us/content/download/1298829/file/%282023-24%20CAR%29%20Probation%20-%20Final.pdf?version=1>

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2024e). *Residential services*. Comprehensive accountability report. <https://www.djj.state.fl.us/content/download/1298830/file/%282023-24%20CAR%29%20Residential%20-%20Final.pdf?version=1>

Florida Mental Health Act, Fla. Stat. §§ 394.451–394.47892 (2025). https://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0300-0399/0394/0394.html

Gagnon, J. C., & Swank, J. M. (2021). A national survey on mental health professional development in juvenile justice facilities: Implications for youth reentry. *Behavioral Disorders*, 46(3), 149–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0198742920911183>

Gagnon, J. C., Mason-Williams, L., Griller Clark, H., LaBelle, B., Mathur, S. R., & Leone, P. E. (2022). Providing high-quality education in juvenile corrections: Next steps. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 92(4), 429–441. <https://doi.org/10.1037/Ort0000612>

Hunter, A., Griller Clark, H., Mason-Williams, L., & Gagnon, J. C. (2022). Curriculum, instruction, and promoting college and career readiness for incarcerated youth: A literature review. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 92(4), 418–428. <https://doi.org/10.1037/Ort0000623>

Kaia Rolle Act, Fla. Stat. § 985.031 (2021). https://florida.public.law/statutes/fla._stat._985.031

National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *Model for comprehensive and integrated school psychological services [Standards]*. <https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/nasp-2020-professional-standards-adopted>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2024). Age boundaries of the juvenile justice system. United States Department of Justice. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/age-boundaries-of-the-juvenile-justice-system#1-0>

University of South Florida. (2025). The Baker Act annual report: Fiscal year 2024–2025. https://www.usf.edu/cbcs/baker-act/documents/ba_usf_annual_report_2024_2025.pdf

U. S. Departments of Education and Justice. (2014). *Guiding principles for providing high-quality education in juvenile justice secure care settings*. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/correctional-education/guiding-principles.pdf>

Improving Diverse Student Outcomes: Culturally Responsive Assessment and Interventions

Mariangely Soto Machuca, Student, University of Central Florida

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the United States has experienced a significant shift in the demographic makeup of students enrolled in the K – 12 public education system. Aligning with trends in the overall United States population, this shift in U.S. public school systems indicates that the educational system is becoming increasingly diverse. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that between 2012 and 2022, the racial/ethnic minority enrollment in public school students demonstrated an observable increase (2024). Most notably, the percentage of those students who identified as Hispanic increased from 24 to 29 percent and the percentage of those students who identified as White decreased from 51 to 44 percent. Through this change, we acknowledge the fact that racial or ethnic minority students now represent the majority of the overall public student population – a great deviation from historical contexts. These statistics affirm the increasing diversity in modern classrooms.

This perceived historical mismatch between the traditional educational system and the diverse student population calls attention to the instructional foundations of learning utilized across the country. More specifically, the diversity-related interventions and instructional tools utilized to educate students must be evaluated. Standardized assessments and interventions have often been deemed as suffering from cultural bias, which frequently leads to the underidentification for gifted and talented programs, overidentification for special education programs, and disproportionate tracking of minoritized students. Thus, marrying culturally responsive assessment with targeted intervention is critical for ensuring equity and improving the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes for diverse students. To that endeavor, this paper is cen-

tered on the question: How do culturally responsive practices in school psychology impact assessment and intervention outcomes for diverse student populations?

To construct a response, a brief description of cultural responsiveness is provided, followed by an introduction of theoretical frameworks integrating culturally responsive practices. Next, the need for culturally responsive assessments and interventions within the education system is discussed. An analysis of principles and applications of those assessments and interventions is then presented, exemplifying how each contributes significantly to development. Finally, a discussion of key findings and implications for practice is included to support how diverse student outcomes may be improved.

WHAT IS CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS?

To accurately represent what cultural responsiveness is, the discussion of what it is not should be had. Cultural responsiveness is not simply the acknowledgment of students' varying cultures and backgrounds. By making purposeful remarks and observations of the differing identities of students, an individual is not engaging in practices that are responsive to the culture of others. Rather, cultural responsiveness involves taking that information and transforming it into something that enables someone to effectively interact with individuals of different backgrounds than their own. They are culturally responsive if they consider, understand, and respect others' cultures and how it may impact or influence their lived experiences. In the case of culturally responsive education, this would develop as the inclusion of assessments, interventions, and instructional strategies that recognize a student's unique

cultural identity and evaluates their knowledge and skill based on those factors (Walker et al., 2023). As culture may impact how a student presents themselves or performs in an educational setting that is different from their home and community setting, it must be considered when creating and implementing school-based strategies. Should institutions aim to be culturally responsive, they must investigate their own pedagogical perspectives and ensure that they are inclusive to the populations they serve.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

While students enrolled in public schools are becoming increasingly diverse, the teaching workforce remains less diverse than that of the student population (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). As a result, students are less likely to receive instruction from an individual with whom they can identify with and who can understand the expectations and needs of the cultures that they come from. In an effort to mitigate the suspected issues surrounding this lack of representation (e.g., racial and cultural bias, racial and cultural achievement gaps, and power influence), culturally relevant pedagogy to promote equity and excellence within education is considered essential (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Richards et al., 2007).

To improve educational equity and its effectiveness for diverse student populations, there must be a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy at the systems level. Culturally responsive pedagogy, as a student-centered teaching approach, focuses on learning and teaching through a culturally supported and learner-centered lens that involves the enactment of institutional, personal, and instructional changes to meet the needs of all learners (Richards et al., 2007). Within this approach, policies and structure, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and materials and strategies are all reviewed and altered to meet the needs of the diverse students in the classroom. This diversity extends to students from varied cultural, linguistic, and ability backgrounds, ensuring that

all student achievement is supported and nurtured. Richards et al. (2007) asserts that teachers have a responsibility to ensure that their students receive equal opportunities to be successful. To achieve this, the assessment of their ability must be completed with instruments deemed valid for the population being assessed. Otherwise, the probability of invalid judgments based on assessments that are not culturally responsive increases drastically.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

As presented by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development, characterized as a bioecological model, children's environment is visualized as an interrelated system of nested structures that impact development (Berk, 2019). In order of impact on a child's development, the structures are considered to be as follows: microsystem (things directly impacting the individual), mesosystem (interaction of microsystems), exosystem (formal and informal social structures), macrosystem (attitudes and ideologies), and the chronosystem (environmental changes in time) (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Historically, cultural norms and expectations are represented under the macrosystem level. The operationalization of schools at this level would vary from one setting to the other, based on the cultural attitudes and ideologies that the individuals within the setting subscribe to. This directly impacts educational systems and the instruction received within them by influencing the development of instructional policies and procedures based on the culture of those who oversee them. In effect, if school-based professionals and administrators are predominantly of one culture, the environments that they create for the students to engage in will likely follow their customs alone, rather than integrating customs and beliefs from all cultures.

A NEED FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS

As traditional, standardized assessments are known to be reflective of middle-class, European American experiences, they often contain hidden cultural biases that may be seen to penalize the diverse student population. This is

evident in the language barriers, situational assumptions, and confusing framework perceived by students of various cultures when completing such assessments (Knight & Segura, 2025). In order to address the inherent bias that exists within these assessments due to a lack of cultural representation, culturally responsive assessments are vital. With the goal of encouraging accessibility for all learners, assessment tools and practices must be made culturally and linguistically fair for students (Knight & Segura, 2025). In doing so, fair and accurate evaluations will take the place of those previously rooted in cultural biases. This will result in more inclusive, equitable environments in which all students feel that they are being provided with genuine opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. Utilization of culturally responsive and evidence-based approaches may allow educational institutions to celebrate culture as a strength, rather than a deficit, boosting student engagement, improving equity, and increasing learner input.

To meet the instructional needs of students of diverse cultural backgrounds, culturally responsive approaches must be utilized. Such is the case when addressing commonly observed racial inequities, such as suspension and office referrals. An increase in equity is essential for schools to effectively implement interventions designed to reduce these disparities (Austin et al., 2023). By operating under a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) framework, interventions can be sharply enhanced with the integration of equity-oriented cultural responsiveness practices. Such culturally responsive behavioral interventions can serve to reduce the disproportionate exposure of minoritized students to the aforementioned exclusionary discipline practices in schools and assist ethnic minority students in achieving satisfactory academic and behavioral outcomes (Austin et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2016).

Deconstructing Bias in Traditional Assessment

Traditional assessment does not assume a holistic perspective of the student, with the stu-

dents' cultural background primarily left unaccounted for, thus leaving space for racial and cultural bias to progress. To contest this, Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017) argue for the reconceptualization of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. Suggesting that separating culture from the student's immediate settings (peers, family, school, church, etc.) limits the understanding of its role in development, the authors propose moving the concept of culture into the microsystem level, where it can directly align with the individual. This arrangement maintains that culture is a vital part of schools and other learning environments.

Linguistic bias persists in assessing competence in diverse students who are plurilingual and may require varied or altered assessment methods to demonstrate their competence and abilities. When linguistic diversity is not represented in educational systems, inequalities may negatively affect plurilingual students who display a multilingual identity. Utilizing the Culturally Responsive Classroom Assessment Inventory, Knight and Segura (2025) conducted a study on elementary-aged students with self-identified plurilingual or multilingual abilities. Their findings indicate that traditional assessments are primarily conducted in languages that do not encompass all languages spoken or known by the students, which results in a mismatch of students' repertoires and current assessment practices. An improper reflection of students' cultural languages and attributes within an education system, such as this, can result in the underperformance of diverse student populations.

DESIGNING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS

For assessments and related interventions to be culturally responsive, the validity and inclusion of the student voice must be considered. Understanding the diverse backgrounds of the student population and the role that plays within teaching and learning will have a direct impact on minoritized student populations (Knight & Segura, 2025; Richards et al., 2007). To ensure that these metrics are met, Walker et al. (2023) advise that in assessment develop-

ment, the following key principles must be taken into account: shared power, engagement, high expectations, flexibility, and asset-based. By including these principles not only in assessment development but also in assessment use, the authors conceive that more equitable assessment experiences will be realized.

Tiered Support Systems

As many schools have adopted a tiered support system, such as a three-tiered Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework or Response to Intervention (RTI) model, it is important that these culturally responsive practices are included in all levels of assessment and intervention within the school. Promoting MTSS as an equity-based approach, Malone et al. (2021) urge that schools assimilate culturally responsive practices through mental health services by encouraging a positive racial school climate at Tier 1, culturally responsive interventions at Tier 2, and culturally responsive psychotherapy at Tier 3. Their systematic literature review of 121 studies and the impact that school-based mental health providers have on the structural and institutional inequities within a school system showed that when culturally responsive practices are absent, racial and ethnic minoritized students report racial microaggressions and noticeable discomfort when discussing culturally relevant issues. Similarly, Castro-Villarral et al. (2015) touch on the need for culturally responsive practices to maintain socially just RTI initiatives in their comprehensive review of the current status of special education services in the United States. The authors discuss the use of RTI in a three-tiered intervention system, emphasizing its use through each tier as interventions are intensified for students. Acknowledging the disproportionate placement of diverse youth in special education programs as one of the most critical issues identified by the U.S. Department of Education in the United States public school system, they draw attention to the potential of RTI in integrating culturally responsive practices. Educators must advocate for the sustainable use of culturally responsive evidence-based interventions in their approach to screening and servicing students

from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The need for culturally responsive practices in education is evident. Through its implementation, positive impacts on outcomes for minoritized students are observed. The integration of culturally responsive assessments and interventions has resulted in an increase in the proper analysis of student ability, student engagement, parent involvement, access to appropriate treatment, student social-emotional knowledge, and life satisfaction (Knight & Segura, 2025; Malone et al., 2021). Additionally, a reduction in discipline referral disparities, unwarranted student behavior, and observed social-emotional issues are also noted as direct results of these culturally responsive practices (Austin et al., 2023). Students of all backgrounds and learning abilities are directly impacted by the universal efforts of these practices, and they can all relish the many advantages associated with culturally responsive education efforts.

In addition to the many positive outcomes associated with cultural responsiveness, there are also implications for educators, school leaders, and policy makers. There is a necessity for school-based professionals, such as school psychologists, who work most closely with the student population in the areas of assessment and intervention, to engage in continuous professional development to unlearn implicit biases. Critical reflection must ensue so that each educator challenges their own assumptions and evaluates their background to ensure that they are not inadvertently skewing their perspective when dealing with students of diverse backgrounds. School psychologists are encouraged to apply culturally based techniques when conducting evaluations and assessments or developing interventions to assist students in achieving positive outcomes (Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, district and state-level mandates must be reformed to enable more flexible and equitable assessment practices.

CONCLUSION

A comprehensive and culturally responsive educational framework that integrates assessments and interventions which are biased-free and identity-affirming is essential for improving the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes for diverse student populations. Assessments and their related interventions hold great weight and should be used with the sole purpose of diminishing social inequities, rather than reinforcing them. With a student population as diverse as that in the United States, educational institutions must look towards these culturally relevant measures to ensure that all students receive the appropriate education, which has been guaranteed to them. To achieve this, school psychologists and other educators must advocate for the inclusion and utilization of culturally responsive assessment and intervention. This serves to diminish the unfair biases that disadvantage culturally diverse students and allow equitable practices to flourish.

REFERENCES

- Austin, S. C., McIntosh, K., Izzard, S., & Daugherty, B. (2023). A systematic review of single-case research examining culturally responsive behavior interventions in schools. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10864-023-09506-8>
- Berk, L. E. (2019). *Exploring child and adolescent development*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Brown-Jeffy, S., & Cooper, J. E. (2011). Toward a conceptual framework of culturally relevant pedagogy: An overview of the conceptual and theoretical literature. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 38(1), 65–84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23479642>
- Castro-Villarreal, F., Villarreal, V., & Sullivan, J. R. (2015). Special education policy and response to intervention: Identifying promises and pitfalls to advance social justice for diverse students. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 20(1), 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-015-0077-3>
- Jones, J., Lee, L., Zigarelli, J., & Nakagawa, Y. (2016). Culturally responsive adaptations in evidence-based treatment: The impact on client satisfaction. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 21(3), 211–222. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-016-0118-6>
- Knight, J., & Segura, M. (2025). Reflections on addressing educational inequalities through the co-creation of a rubric for assessing children's plurilingual and intercultural competence. *Education Sciences*, 15(6), 762. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060762>
- Malone, C. M., Wycoff, K., & Turner, E. A. (2021). Applying a MTSS framework to address racism and promote mental health for racial/ethnic minoritized youth. *Psychology in the Schools*, 59(12). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22606>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Racial/Ethnic enrollment in public schools. Condition of Education; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cge>
- Richards, H. V., Brown, A. F., & Forde, T. B. (2007). Addressing diversity in schools: Culturally responsive pedagogy. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 39(3), 64–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990703900310>
- Vélez-Agosto, N. M., Soto-Crespo, J. G., Vizcarondo-Oppenhimer, M., Vega-Molina, S., & García Coll, C. (2017). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory revision: Moving culture from the macro into the micro. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(5), 900–910. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617704397>
- Walker, M. E., Olivera-Aguilar, M., Lehman, B., Laitusis, C. C., Guzman-Orth, D., & Gholson, M. (2023). Culturally responsive assessment: Provisional principles. *ETS Research Report Series*, 2023(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12374>

The Florida School Psychologist

Contact FASP's Newsletter Chair, Ashley Womble (newsletter@fasp.org or awomble@fasp.org) for information about the news-letter or to submit an article for the next issue. Wondering what to write about? We accept research articles, professional book reviews, articles about an interesting professional project, etc.

The mission of the Florida Association of School Psychologists is to promote and to advocate for the mental health and educational development of Florida's children, youth, and families and to advance school psychology in the state of Florida for the benefit of all students.

©2026 Florida Association of
School Psychologists
www.FASP.org

Attention Department of Health Licensees



An important change will go into effect for all DOH licensed professionals (with a few exceptions) — this includes licensed school psychologists and licensed psychologists:

Effective July 1, 2025, HB 975 requires that all health care practitioners undergo a fingerprint-based background screening as a requirement for obtaining licensure. If you are renewing your license with Department, you must have a screening completed for your renewal application to be processed. For detailed information, including frequently asked questions, visit <https://flhealthsource.gov/backgroundscreening/>.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR PLATINUM SPONSORS



MHS

PAR[®]

Creating Connections.
Changing Lives.



Riverside Insights[®]

Follow Us on Social Media!



[https://
www.facebook.com/
FriendsWithFASP](https://www.facebook.com/FriendsWithFASP)



[https://
www.instagram.com/
FLSchPsychs](https://www.instagram.com/FLSchPsychs)



[https://
www.linkedin.com/
company/FLSchPsychs](https://www.linkedin.com/company/FLSchPsychs)