

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

School Psychology 2010: Demographics, Employment, and the Context for Professional Practices—Part 1

BY MICHAEL J. CURTIS, JOSE M. CASTILLO, & CHERYL GELLEY

Being acutely aware of the need for data to inform its own positions and policies, as well as to support its efforts to influence policies and legislation and to advocate for children, youth, and families, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) established a policy in 1989 mandating a national study of the field every 5 years. The purpose of the studies was to generate a comprehensive description of the field of school psychology across the United States, as well as to allow for analyses of changes in the field over time. The first study collected data based on the 1989–1990 school year (Graden & Curtis, 1991). Subsequent studies were completed every 5 years following the initial study: 1994–1995 (Curtis, Hunley, Walker, & Baker, 1999); 1999–2000 (Curtis, Grier, Abshier, Sutton, & Hunley, 2002); and 2004–2005 (Curtis, Lopez, Castillo, Batsche, Minch, & Smith, 2008). It has become apparent in the years since adoption of the NASP policy that the data generated through the mandated studies have proven valuable not only to NASP, but to other national and state professional associations, to school districts, and even to individual school psychologists. The data reported here reflect the most recent NASP study and are based on the 2009–2010 school year.

This article is the first in a two-part series. This report will describe the demographic characteristics of school psychologists across the United States as well as the context within which school psychologists work. The second article, which will appear in the June, 2012 issue of *COMMUNIQUE*, will report on the professional practices of school psychologists who are employed full-time in schools.

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RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE

Connecting Students to Schools to Support Their Emotional Well-Being and Academic Success

BY MICHAEL L. SULKOWSKI, MICHELLE K. DEMARAY, & PHILIP J. LAZARUS

Students' sense of belonging to school communities decreases as they progress through primary and secondary education (Marks, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). In fact, approximately half (40%–60%) of students are chronically disengaged from school by the time they reach high school (Byrk & Schneider, 2002; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004). Furthermore, chronic school disengagement contributes to school dropout (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1990), which is a significant social problem, as 28% of U.S. students do not graduate from high school (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011).

Thus, a lack of school engagement negatively affects millions of students, and efforts to connect students to schools should be at the forefront of current initiatives to improve education. However, an earnest discussion on how to make schools more open, welcoming, and nurturing is largely absent from the ongoing dialogue on improving student, teacher, and school performance. Although school connectedness often is overlooked as schools face significant pressures regarding academic performance, academic and lifelong success is related to feeling emotionally engaged [CONTINUED ON PAGE 20]

COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Communicating Effectively to Obtain Supervision of Professional Practice

BY BARBARA A. FISCHETTI, BRADLEY PETRY, & JESSICA KOUVEL MUNCH

School psychologists are expected by parents, students, and their profession to maintain their competency to ensure the appropriate delivery of psy-

chological services. Supervision by a school psychologist is a prime method for maintaining skill levels and updating professional services. Unfortunately, many school districts do not understand the critical importance of such professional supervision, versus administrative supervision, and have school psychologists supervised by nonschool psychologists who cannot provide the level of guidance and support necessary. In fact, Chafouleas, Clonan, and Vanauken (2002) found that only 55% of school psychologists receive formal supervision and only 13% of school psychologists receive informal supervision. This indicates that school psychologists are likely not getting enough administrative or professional supervision, and they may not be accessing alternate methods of su-

supervision to meet recommendations from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). School psychologists are responsible for seeking out and advocating for proper supervision when it isn't provided. This column highlights key information and effective strategies to communicate to supervisors and/or peers your supervision needs and the benefits to students.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE AND STANDARDS

The NASP *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (2010a) supports supervision and delineates six organizational principles that are necessary for systems employing school psychologists. Organizational Principle 5: Super- [CONTINUED ON PAGE 14]

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Connecting Students to Schools

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and connected to the school environment. In this regard, school psychologists, who are important members of school communities with advanced knowledge of how to support students' academic performance and emotional well-being, are well positioned to lead efforts to increase school connectedness.

School connectedness subsumes a variety of terms that are used in several disciplines (e.g., medicine, education, and psychology), such as relatedness, school belonging, school attachment, school bonding, school climate, school connection, school engagement, and teacher support (Johnson, 2009; Libbey, 2004). The construct involves "the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2004, p. 233). More broadly, definitions of school connectedness also can include distal members of school communities (e.g., community leaders, grandparents) and how these individuals interact with primary caregivers, teachers, and students to effect education (Rowe, Stewart, & Patterson, 2007).

Several theoretical orientations such as the belongingness hypothesis (e.g., humans have emotional need to be an accepted member of a group) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (e.g., basic needs must be met before individuals will strongly desire secondary or higher-level needs) imply that the feelings of belonging and social connectedness are fundamental human needs (Baumeister & Leary, 2000; Maslow, 1943). Therefore, along with efforts to educate and to foster students' healthy academic and intellectual development, the onus is on schools and members of school communities to reach out and connect with students on a social-emotional level.

OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

School connectedness was first investigated as an important factor in student retention and dropout prevention (e.g., Wehlage et al., 1990). However, research on the construct has expanded over the past 2 decades. For example, school connectedness was the strongest protective factor for both girls and boys for decreasing drug and alcohol use, truancy, early sexual behaviors, violence, and risky behavior (e.g., drunk driving) in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which included more than 36,000 middle and high school students (Resnick et al., 1997). Similarly, a study by Dornbusch, Erikson, Laird, and Wong (2001) found a relation between school connectedness and lower use of alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes in adolescents, and a study by Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) found school connectedness to be associated with lower rates of substance use, delinquency, violent behavior, and gang membership. School connectedness also has been found to buffer against the effects of a negative home environment (Maddox & Prinz, 2003) and emotional distress (Wilkinson-Lee, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011). Furthermore, school connectedness is positively related to healthy self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, and positive peer relationships and is negatively related to the development of conduct problems, antisocial behavior, depression, anxiety, emotional distress, and suicidality (Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010; Osterman, 2000; Resnick et al., 1997; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006).

In addition to bolstering psychosocial functioning, school connectedness has a positive impact on children's academic performance. Specifically, school connectedness is associated with academic achievement, including students' overall grades and scores on standardized tests (Klem & Connell, 2004; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Furthermore, a review by Osterman (2000) found a relation between school connectedness, student motivation, self-regulation, and student attitudes toward school. Connected students are more likely to display higher attendance rates and stay in school longer, which increases the likelihood of academic, occupational, and life success (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998). Results of these studies suggest that benefits related to connecting students to schools are global and result in improvements in students' overall functioning. In other words, efforts to increase school connectedness can have a profound and pervasive impact on students' emotional well-being and academic performance.

AT-RISK STUDENT POPULATIONS

Some students are particularly vulnerable to experiencing challenges, impairments, or disruptions in their psychosocial and academic functioning. These students display an even greater need to feel included and connected to members of school communities. However, barriers may exist that challenge educators and others to connect with these students.

Children from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds may have difficulty bonding with educators and peers from predominant sociocultural groups due to cultural and linguistic differences, as well as to the presence of racism, systematic bias, and discrimination in society and schools (Ferri & Connor, 2005). These youth often are misunderstood by educators, are more frequently suspended (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), receive harsher punishments (Office for Civil Rights, 1992), and

are more frequently referred for special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002) than are their culturally or linguistically dominant peers. Similarly, students who live in households affected by poverty often are disconnected from school communities due to a range of learning barriers including individual (e.g., poor healthcare access, inadequate/poor nutrition), family (e.g., transportation issues, homelessness), and social barriers (e.g., limited access to quality education and low social capital; for review, see Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008).

Students with disabilities, mental health disorders, and chronic health problems also are at risk for chronic school disengagement. These students may be particularly vulnerable to bullying and social exclusion by peers (Mishna, 2004). In addition, teachers may be unfamiliar with their disabilities and conditions, which can contribute to misunderstanding, misattributions, and negative perceptions of student behavior (Haager, Watson, & Willows, 1995). Furthermore, youth with serious emotional disturbance or chronic health problems may struggle with school reintegration after long stays in hospitals, residential treatment centers, or homebound educational settings.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth often are victims of peer aggression and feel ostracized from the social environment at school. D'Augelli, Pilkington, and Hershberger (2002) found that approximately half of these youth are

verbally harassed, and 11% are physically attacked at school. Additionally, sexual minority youth with no significant connections to an adult at school display an elevated risk to attempt suicide compared to their heterosexual peers (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). However, lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth who report lower rates of suicidal behavior and peer victimization are in schools that have sexual minority support groups, which highlights the importance of fostering school connectedness and social supports for these youth (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Goodenow et al., 2006).

APPROACHES TO STRENGTHENING STUDENT CONNECTIONS

A variety of resources, curricula, programs, and interventions have been developed to facilitate school connectedness. Some approaches to improving school connectedness are broad and target many outcomes,

whereas others specifically address classroom climate. In the following sections, several promising programs and approaches to increasing school connectedness are discussed. Many of these already exist in school systems and can be implemented with little cost.

Universal programs. Negative outcomes associated with low student connectedness can be addressed on a universal and ongoing basis. Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs display promise in enhancing students' emotional well-being, academic achievement, and connectedness to the school climate (Zins & Elias, 2006). These programs aim to reduce an array of risk factors, as well as to foster protective or resiliency factors in whole school systems (Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). A recent meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal SEL programs by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) found SEL programs to be associated with improvements in students' social-emotional functioning, attitudes about school, behavior, performance on state achievement tests, and school climate in general. Additionally, other studies suggest that SEL programs foster caring student-teacher relationships, improve student's bonding with peers, and facilitate collaborative learning (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Adding to the promise of universal SEL programs is research suggesting that these are effective at all education levels (e.g., elementary, middle, high) and community settings (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) and can be implemented with adequate integrity by teachers and other school staff or without the support of outside individuals (Durlak et al., 2011). Therefore, SEL programs can be incorporated into routine educational practices without extra resources or supports.

Similar to SEL, although with less empirical support, Rowe et al. (2007) advocate for using a health-promotion service delivery model to facilitate school connectedness. This model aims to increase inclusiveness, democracy, and participation in individual classrooms and the broad school environment. To achieve these goals, a health-promotion service delivery model emphasizes student-centered instruction and including students in decisions about how to structure and govern the classroom atmosphere. Additionally, this model underscores the importance of student cooperation, experiential learning, and developing partnerships between students, school staff, and members of the general community. Community agencies are perceived as equal partners in this service delivery model, and an emphasis is placed on understanding how economic, social, and cultural factors affect student's sense of connectedness and overall well-being. Although research is needed to validate the health-promotion model, many

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of the components of the model are incorporated in related intervention approaches (e.g., SEL) and research-based practices. Further, the health-promotion model as advocated by Rowe et al. (2007) has broad and intuitive appeal.

Targeted programs and approaches. Student-centered learning is linked with increased motivation for learning, student engagement, and school connectedness (Barker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Rowe et al., 2007; Wilson, 2000). Additionally, small group work, class discussions, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning activities help to enhance social relationships and school connectedness (Barker et al., 1997; Korinek, Walther-Thomas, McLaughlin, & Williams, 1999; Schaps & Soloman, 1990). Cooperative learning activities that include small groups of heterogeneous students can help support the educational and psychosocial needs of at-risk students. For example, cooperative learning has been shown to improve attitudes toward other students and teachers, improve race relations, and improve social relationships for students with disabilities and emotional disorders (Korinek et al., 1999; Slaven & Oickle, 1981).

THE NASP CONNECTION

The theme for the 2011 School Psychology Awareness Week (November 11–18) sponsored by NASP was “Every link matters. Make a connection.” Although this weeklong initiative provided an important opportunity for school psychologists to organize and lead efforts to disseminate materials aimed at supporting student needs, these efforts can be extended throughout the entire year. To help support this initiative, the NASP website includes a variety of free resources for download as well as helpful resources (e.g., premade posters, press releases, poster activities, parent bulletins) that can easily be implemented or disseminated. Additionally, the NASP website includes specific ready-to-use activities that are designed to facilitate school connectedness. For example, the Gratitude Works Program, a program that involves having students write letters of gratitude to individuals who have made a difference in their own lives or the lives of others, is freely available. Similarly, the NASP website includes materials to implement the Possibilities in Action Partner program, which aims to recognize special contributions that teachers, administrators, other staff, and parents make in their daily work and interactions with students and the Student POWER Award, which involves honoring students who actively try to make a difference in the lives of others.

In the September issue of *COMMUNIQUE*, Cohn and Cowan (2011) provided specific recommendations for school psychologists to implement the aforementioned NASP resources and free programs. Additionally, they discussed novel ways to foster connections in school communities such as creating webpages that allow students to net-

work with other members of educational communities and strategies to increase the visibility of school psychologists in the eyes of policy makers. NASP members can access this article at the following link: <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/40/1/communication-matters.aspx>.

APPLICATIONS TO PRACTICE

School psychologists are well positioned to promote school connectedness. Strategies to increase connectedness may be broad in scope or targeted. Some ways that school psychologists can better connect students to schools are listed below. Additionally, several online resources are included that provide more information and resources to help with this important aim.

Universal programs and strategies.

- Stress to all legislators, school board members, and other stakeholders the critical link between emotional well-being, school connectedness, and student achievement.
- Educate and train teachers on the importance of school connectedness and strategies to improve connections to their students. For example, training the teachers on effective classroom management and methods to work with diverse students may help foster an overall positive learning environment in the classroom (CDC, 2009).
- Educate parents on the importance of school connectedness and provide them with strategies to improve connectedness for their children. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention provides a helpful handout for parents titled, “Helping Your Child Feel Connected to School.” This handout can be found at: http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/connectedness_parents.pdf.
- Conduct a school-wide assessment of students to determine which students are not connected to members of a school community in a meaningful way. Then work with the school community to develop a plan to ensure that all youth have one positive relationship with an adult in school. For additional information see: <http://cecp.air.org/download/MCMonographFINAL.pdf>.
- Advocate for applying systems-wide programs and interventions to foster students’ emotional well-being (e.g., SEL, health promotion).

Targeted programs and strategies.

- Access and use freely available NASP school connectedness resources through-



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out the school year (<http://nasponline.org/communications/spaw/2011>). This webpage lists activities and ideas that focus on creating links to schools such as the Gratitude Works program, the Possibilities in Action Partner program, and the Student POWER Award.

- Support the development and provision of incentives for students and families who may experience school disenfranchisement (e.g., free spaghetti dinners, access to school recreational equipment after school). Support and implement evidence-based programs designed to reduce bullying (Lazarus & Pfohl, 2011) and promote positive peer interactions among classmates. Display SAFE ZONE stickers to support LGBTQ youth. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) provides inexpensive resources for educators to support LGBTQ youth: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/1641.html?state=tools&type=tools>.

CONCLUSION

Schools and lives can be transformed by efforts to listen to and deeply connect with students. A week before completing suicide on September 18, 2011, Jamey Rodemeyer, a 14-year-old male student from Amherst, NY, wrote online: "I always say how bullied I am but no one listens. What do I have to do so people will listen to me?" (Tan, 2011). Jamey was brutally bullied by his peers who posted hateful messages encouraging his death and criticizing him for his sexual orientation prior to his suicide. Sadly, Jamey clearly was a victim of a type of abuse that no student should endure and he felt alone and disconnected. He needed help and support from members of his school and community.

In addition to taking a strong stand against bullying and working to improve school climate as a whole, school psychologists can remain steadfast in their efforts to reach out and connect with disconnected students such as Jamey through providing counseling services, developing individualized interventions, communicating with important caregivers, and encouraging the formation of support groups for disconnected and marginalized youth. As school psychologists, we are uniquely positioned to help school personnel and other stakeholders connect with students to support their emotional well-being and increase their academic functioning. Considering how having meaningful connections to caring adults is a protective factor against emotional distress and suicide (Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2001), these collective efforts could ultimately improve and, in some instances, save lives. ■

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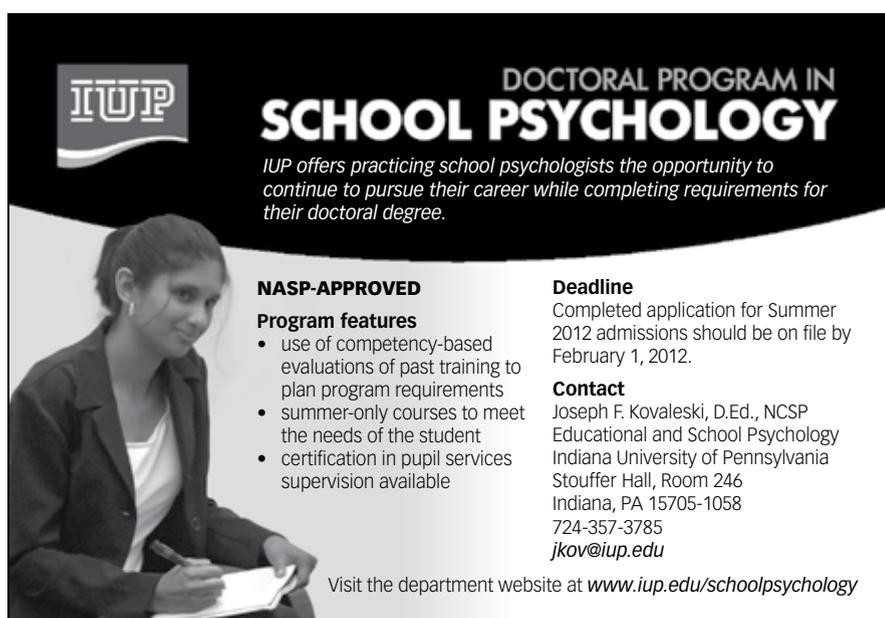
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