

## School Psychology in the United States

### **1. Context of school psychology**

The United States (US) includes 50 states as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and other territories and its geography is diverse including plains, mountains, hills, river valleys and volcanic topography. The US is among the leading industrial nations and is advanced in production of petroleum, steel, cars, aerospace, telecommunications, chemicals, electronics, food processing, consumer goods, lumber and mining.

The largest proportion of employment (31%) is in the managerial and professional sectors, followed by;

- technical, scales and administrative support - 29%
- manufacturing, mining, transportation and crafts – 24%
- services – 12%
- farming, forestry and fishing - 2%

Children under 18 make up 26% of the US population with 69% of children living with two parents.

### **Education**

The education system includes:

- nursery school (age 3-4)
- kindergarten (age 5-6)
- grades 1 – 12
- post-secondary system (includes vocational and technical colleges, community and junior colleges, senior colleges and graduate schools in universities)

Elementary schooling is considered to begin in kindergarten and continue up to grade 5. Secondary schooling is made up of the following:

- Middle school / junior high school – grades 6 to 8
- High School – grades 9 to 12

Class sizes vary across the age ranges. The average elementary school class will include 20 to 25 children. Kindergarten classes are usually smaller and in secondary schools classes are slightly larger. The vast majority of children attend publicly funded education. However, 10% of children attend private and religious-supported schools – these are usually children from higher income families.

Approximately 4-5% of children drop out of school each year; the majority of these children are from lower income families and more black and Hispanic children drop out compared to white non-Hispanic children. More than 6.5 million children receive special education services and approximately \$50 billion dollars is spent supporting children with special educational needs each year.

### **2. History and current status of school psychology**

#### **History**

The first US psychological clinic was established in Pennsylvania by Witmer in 1896 and is seen to mark the origin of School Psychology in the US. Witmer aimed for experts in pedagogy and psychology to support children who were not benefitting from ordinary educational methods. The practice of School Psychology grew slowly over the next 50 years as most university psychology departments were focused

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on experimental rather than applied psychology. Arnold Gessel held the first title of 'School Psychologist' in 1915. Standards for training and licensing School Psychologists did not begin until the 1920s where it started in New York. Four key national conferences were held between 1950 and 2002 to consider the future of the profession of School Psychology and how to maximize the benefits for children and schools.

### Current Status

The American Psychological Society and the National Association of School Psychologists define school psychology as involving 'the science and practice of psychology with children, youth, families, learners of all ages and the schooling process' involving 'a range of psychological assessment, intervention, prevention, health promotion and program development' at the individual and systems level. In 2005 there were 32,300 School Psychologists at work in the US.

The level of qualification of a School Psychologist can vary. The following figures indicate the percentage of School Psychologists with various qualifications:

- 41% - master's degree
- 28% - specialist degree
- 30% - doctoral degree

### 3. Infrastructure of school psychology

#### Organizations

There are two key organizations in the US that most School Psychologists are members of, these are the American Psychological Association (Division of School Psychology) and the National Association of School Psychologists.

Other important organizations related to the training of School Psychologists include:

- Council of Directors of School Psychology Programs
- National Association of State Consultants in School Psychology
- Society for the Study of School Psychology
- Trainers of School Psychology

#### Laws and Regulations

School Psychologists need to be credentialed and most state departments of education regulate the practice of School Psychology. A national certification process allows School Psychologists to become certified and licensed to work across states.

School Psychology practice is influenced by federal legislation such as the Civil Rights Act (1964), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Rehabilitation Act (1973), Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (1974), No Child Left Behind (2002).

School Psychologists must follow the standards governing professional, scientific, educational and ethical issues of practice set out by the American Psychological Association and the standards set out by the National Association of School Psychologists.

#### Journals and Newsletters

There are four key professional journals in the US:

- Journal of School Psychology

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- School Psychology Quarterly
- Psychology in the Schools
- School Psychology review

In addition, many School Psychologists also refer to the following publications:

- The California School Psychologist
- School Psychology International
- Canadian Journal of School Psychology
- Journal of Applied School Psychology

Newsletters from the National Association of School Psychologists and the Division of School Psychology also contribute to sharing information within the profession

### 4. Preparation of school psychologists

Approximately 8500 students are enrolled in training for School Psychology. There are 218 post-graduate programs for training and students can graduate with a masters, specialist or doctorate degree. A master's degree takes 1-2 years, a specialist degree takes 3 years including a 1 year internship and a doctoral degree involves a 4 to 6 year program including 3 years of coursework, a 1 year internship and a dissertation. There are no set entry requirements for graduate programs in School Psychology apart from the need to have an undergraduate degree. Some students have experience in teaching or other work with children but this is not necessarily a requirement.

School Psychologists work in public and private schools, special schools, centers and private practice with the majority being employed in a public school setting. A small number of School Psychologists work in private schools, universities, medical services and research settings. Salaries can range from \$54,000 to \$96,000.

Standards for the training of School Psychologists are set by the National Association of School Psychologists and the American Psychological Association. The National Association of School Psychologists standards require students to be trained in data-based decision making and accountability, consultation and collaboration, effective instruction and development of cognitive/academic skills, socialization and development of life skills, student diversity in development and learning, school and systems organization, policy development, prevention, crisis and mental health, home/school/community collaboration, research and evaluation, school psychology practice and development and information technology. These standards emphasis academic knowledge, assessment and intervention services, a focus on children and youth, interpersonal skills, professional decision-making and knowledge of research and statistics.

Some US School Psychologists believe that training should have a strong focus on research and School Psychologists should work as scientist-practitioners. However, this view is not held by all. There is also a lack of agreement on whether School Psychology fits within the field of Psychology or the field of Education.

### 5. Roles, functions, and responsibilities of school psychologists

School Psychology Services can be delivered in different ways. The following provides an overview of each:

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### Individual psycho-educational evaluations

Evaluation of a child's cognitive, affective, social, emotional and linguistic characteristics using educational and psychological assessment techniques

### Direct services

Tutoring, teaching and counseling to promote children's development

### Indirect services

Work with parents, teachers, principals or other professionals including consultation, training, assessment and collaborative work

### Research / evaluation

Assisting professionals in education and psychology to develop evidence-based practice

### Supervision and administration

Personnel and psychological services including planning, hiring and supervising personnel, promoting their development and coordinating with other community services

### Prevention services

Prevention of difficulties (e.g. related to drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, school dropout, school violence etc).

School Psychologists usually engage in some but not necessarily all of these activities in their daily work. Most work takes place in elementary schooling.

## **6. Current practice impacting school psychologists**

There is a shortage of School Psychologists, particularly to fill School Psychology faculty positions due to a lack of doctoral students entering academic roles. This is particularly worrying given the need to train more School Psychologists. There is also a focus on evidence-based practice and interventions linked to federal legislation and training programs are therefore likely to increase their focus on this in the coming years.