



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
Delivery of Special Education Services**

**Presented to the
House Education Committee, Special Education Subcommittee
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**By
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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak today about special education in Pennsylvania and the role that school psychologists play.

I am Dr. David Lillenstein, a school psychologist with the Derry Township School District in Hershey. I am also the Section President for school psychologists at PSEA, the Pennsylvania Delegate to the National Association of School Psychologists, and Past President and Board member of the Association of School Psychologists of Pennsylvania. I am speaking with you this morning on behalf of over 1500 Pennsylvania school psychologists.

Our role in the special education process is largely to assist in determining eligibility for special education and then provide student and staff support and intervention to address students' identified needs. Most school psychologists divide their jobs into 2 categories - preventative and reactive. Our duties in special education tend to be more reactive in nature and impact fewer students. Preventative duties tend to benefit more students. Unfortunately, we face many challenges in being able to be preventative. The recommended ratio of school psychologists to students is 1:500. Sadly, the ratio in Pennsylvania is 1:1,400. As a consequence, school psychologists are often relegated to more reactive duties and find themselves limited in their role and function. More time is spent performing basic reactive duties such as conducting eligibility evaluations for special education and meeting compliance regulations and deadlines. With poor ratios, less time is spent on prevention and intervention such as addressing student mental health.

Special education is fraught with mandates. For example, in Pennsylvania there is a mandate for students to be re-evaluated when they move into Pennsylvania with an identified disability from another state. Another mandate states that previously identified students who are entering kindergarten need to be re-evaluated, as the disability of developmental delay does not apply to school-age students in Pennsylvania, as it does in most other states. A third mandate requires that evaluations for special education eligibility be conducted within 60 *calendar*, not *school* days. These mandates are extremely time consuming and redundant. What this means is that while many of our friends and relatives are using their weekends and extended winter and spring breaks to recharge, school psychologists are often found writing evaluation reports and trying to meet the paperwork requirements and deadlines that tick away even while school is not in session. I want to stress that for most school psychologists, this is a nearly year-round job that bleeds into evenings, weekends, and holidays, and the majority of that time is dedicated to the special education process and meeting mandates. I love my job, but I can't serve all students to the best of my ability when I spend most of my time chasing compliance deadlines for special education services.

During the first week of school this year, a student with an IEP at Hershey High School who I evaluated and with whom I now meet weekly came to my office. He told me how happy he was to be in school again full-time and that he couldn't wait to see me as the past year and a half was so lonely. He went on to say how difficult school was for him because he kept so much inside, and how he had nobody he could talk to and no one who could understand him. He cried and cried, and he told me how good it felt to be able to talk and have someone listen. I asked him why he didn't talk to his parents, and he told me

that they don't understand and don't listen. He told me that he asked if he could go to someone to talk to, and they told him no. He told me that the only place he can really talk to someone is at school.

This student is not alone and speaks for thousands of students across our Commonwealth. Students like him are desperate for help and in urgent need of having someone help them. I'm lucky at Derry Township in that I am able to bring on School Psychologist interns who can assist with some tasks so that I can make myself available to meet with students like the one I mentioned. Unfortunately in some districts, one school psychologist must be everything to everyone. While I hate that it must be this way, the tasks that we have to prioritize are the ones with state mandates and timelines attached. I have never and would never turn away a student in crisis, but I've definitely foregone time with my family to meet mandated deadlines due to a student needing the support of a caring and trusted adult.

In Pennsylvania, there are currently over 1500 school psychologists working in public and private schools, IUs, and charter schools. School psychologists support students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. We bring extensive training and expertise in learning, mental health, and behavior to remove educational barriers to learning and help students succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. School psychologists bring this expertise into the school environment, which is a natural setting where students can receive mental and behavioral health supports with limited stigma and financial barriers.

School psychologists provide direct academic, behavioral, and emotional support interventions to students; consult with teachers, families, and other mental health, special education, and pupil services professionals to improve support strategies; work with school administrators to improve school-wide practices and policies; and collaborate with community providers to coordinate needed services. We help schools successfully improve academic achievement, promote positive behavior and mental health, and create safe and supportive learning environments for all.

Pennsylvania is currently experiencing shortages of school psychologists across the Commonwealth and many districts this year have been unable to fill open positions. There is such a high demand for the services a school psychologist can provide, both with special education and mental health, that many districts are actively seeking to hire additional school psychologists.

Compounding the shortages, Pennsylvania State University is sunseting its school psychology training program, not because it is a program that is losing money, but for no apparent reason. This program is one of the oldest and most highly regarded school psychology training programs in the country. The Indiana University of Pennsylvania recently reduced the number of faculty in its school psychology training program due to budget cuts at the university. Millersville University is currently operating its school psychology training program with 2 open faculty positions. How can we expect to expand school psychology services in school districts with fewer training programs, smaller programs, and fewer students and graduates?

All students face problems from time to time related to learning, social relationships, making difficult decisions, or managing emotions such as feeling depressed, anxious, worried, or isolated. School

psychologists can help students, families, schools, and members of the community understand and resolve both long-term, chronic problems and short-term issues that students may face. We stand ready to help students, whether it's helping them through a life stressor or helping them access special education services. We are a highly skilled and ready resource in the effort to ensure that all children and youth thrive in school, at home, and in life.

Let's not allow the barriers above that we *can* control, such as the training of school psychologists and special education mandates, be added to the barriers that students face at home and school. We need to address the variables that we can directly control that may increase student access to help from school psychologists.

With your help, we can remove barriers that limit access to a school psychologist. With your help, we can remove or modify some of the mandates that provide barriers to students and teachers getting help. With your help, we can increase the number of school psychologists in the training pipeline through programs such as loan forgiveness, tuition reimbursement, and state funded school psychology internships in exchange for working in Pennsylvania schools after graduation. School psychologists must complete an internship of 1,000+ hours before beginning their career, and these internships are often unpaid or barely paid. While this is great preparation for their future work in schools, it is a huge barrier keeping people from entering the profession - and it's something this body can fix. With your help, we can maintain the amount of funding for training programs for school psychology or maybe even increase support of training and preparation so that universities can expand or increase training programs for school psychologists. With your help, we can improve access to mental health and special education services for students throughout this Commonwealth. Without a doubt this investment will pay dividends in our communities for years to come.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important issue.

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Appendix A. Examples of responsibilities performed by school psychologists from the National Association of School Psychologists

Improve Academic Achievement

- Promote student motivation and engagement
- Conduct psychological and academic assessments
- Individualize instruction and interventions
- Manage student and classroom behavior
- Monitor student progress
- Collect and interpret student and classroom data
- Reduce inappropriate referrals to special education

Promote Positive Behavior and Mental Health

- Improve students' communication and social skills
- Assess student emotional and behavioral needs
- Provide individual and group counseling
- Promote problem solving, anger management and conflict resolution
- Reinforce positive coping skills and resilience
- Promote positive peer relationships and social problem solving
- Make referrals to and help coordinate community services provided in schools

Support Diverse Learners

- Assess diverse learning needs
- Provide culturally responsive services to students and families from diverse backgrounds
- Plan appropriate Individualized Education Programs for students with disabilities
- Modify and adapt curricula and instruction
- Adjust classroom facilities and routines to improve student engagement and learning
- Monitor and effectively communicate with parents about student progress

Create Safe, Positive School Climates

- Prevent bullying and other forms of violence
- Support social-emotional learning
- Assess school climate and improve school connectedness
- Implement and promote positive discipline and restorative justice
- Implement school-wide positive behavioral supports
- Identify at risk students and school vulnerabilities
- Provide crisis prevention and intervention services

Strengthen Family-School Partnerships

- Help families understand their child's learning and mental health needs
- Assist in navigating special education processes
- Connect families with community service providers when necessary
- Help effectively engage families with teachers and other school staff
- Enhance staff understanding and responsiveness to diverse cultures and backgrounds
- Help students transition between school and community learning environments, such as residential treatment or juvenile justice programs

Improve School-Wide Assessment and Accountability

- Monitor individual student progress in academics and behavior
- Generate and interpret useful student and school outcome data
- Collect and analyze data on risk and protective factors related to student outcomes
- Plan services at the district, building, classroom, and individual levels