OSPA/IUC Joint Task Force to Address School Psychologist Shortage

Background:

Late in the 2015 school year it became apparent through inquiries to the OSPA office from superintendents and pupil services administrators that several school districts were having great difficulty attracting school psychologist candidates to apply for job openings. The situation became more acute over the summer months as some of these openings remained unfilled. Since then, OSPA has routinely heard from both ESCs and school districts expressing their frustration at the lack of candidates applying for openings, particularly in underserved areas of the state.

Last fall, OSPA and the Interuniversity Council of Ohio School Psychology training programs (IUC) formed a joint task force to better identify the severity of the shortage and form recommendations targeted to address the identified areas of shortages, including recommendations that focus on recruitment and retention.

Contributing to the school psychologist shortage in the 2015-16 school year were the following factors:

1. Recent STRS law changes provided incentives for eligible school psychologists to retire by the end of the 2015 school year. According to OSPA 2013 Omnibus Survey data, the highest number of retirements occurred in 2015 (26), closely preceded by 2014 (11) and 2013 (16). Projected retirements drop in 2016 (6), 2017 and 2018 (7) and 2019 (3).

2. Columbus City School District hired approximately 26 more school psychologists, which contributed to fewer candidates available to apply for other school district open positions.

3. A higher than normal attrition rate (10%) of school psychology students which resulted in fewer interns graduating from the nine Ohio school psychology graduate programs. A variety of factors contributed to the attrition rate, including but not limited to: doctoral students obtaining APPIC internships; students postponing internships due to medical reasons; students choosing to complete out-of-state internships; students failing to progress in programs and student withdrawals.
In addition to the OSPA/IUC task force, a group representing related service provider associations, as well as the Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA), the Ohio Education Service Center Association (OESCA) and the Ohio Association of Pupil Services Administrators (OAPSA) have also been collaborating to address the larger issue of related service provider shortages and intervention specialist shortages. This group commissioned a survey, completed by the Muskingum Valley ESC (MVESC), for the purpose of quantifying the severity of the shortage across these staffing categories. Data from this survey was reviewed and analyzed by the OSPA/IUC Task Force and was most helpful in framing the recommendations. The group of related service provider associations and administrator associations intends to also draft an advocacy action plan to address this statewide shortage issue.

**What is the Current State of School Psychologist Staffing Issues?**

Despite past and ongoing efforts to address placing school psychologists in underserved districts, it is clear from the recent (July 2016) data from the survey commissioned by associations representing related service providers and administrators that statewide shortages exist, are increasing, and warrant a proactive, targeted action plan by local, state and federal policy makers.

The majority of the survey data came from ESC respondents, with 534 school districts represented in the survey, which equates to 87% of all school districts. The following ESCs did not participate in the survey: Auglaize County, Gallia-Vinton County, Geauga County, Hancock County, Lawrence County, North Central Ohio, Tri-County ESC, and Western Buckeye ESC. In addition to the ESC data reported, 221 school districts also responded, resulting in a 36.29% response rate. The survey developers concluded that, after examining the characteristics of those responding school districts, with known total-district characteristics, the final response rate was sufficient to judge the findings accurate, within 6%.

From the data collected, respondents reported a total of 127 (range 119-134) current unfilled school psychologist positions. The survey also asked the question: If nothing changes in terms of supply and demand, how many unfilled school psychologist positions do you predict for your client districts during the next five years? This number of future 5-year predictions on unfilled positions is 294 (range 277-312).
Data was also reported by school district typology, based on the following ODE categories:

Typology Code 1: Rural- High Student Poverty & Small Student Population;  
Typology Code 2: Rural- Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population;  
Typology Code 3: Small Town- Low Student Poverty & Small Student Population;  
Typology Code 4: Small Town- High Student Poverty & Small Student Population;  
Typology Code 5: Suburban- Low Student Poverty & Average Student Population;  
Typology Code 6: Suburban- Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population;  
Typology Code 7: Urban - High Student Poverty & Average Student Population;  
Typology Code 8: Urban- Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population

It should be noted that because only one third of all school districts responded, the Typology data could be under reported, and if that is the case, no conclusions should be drawn from it. However, the data clearly demonstrates there is a shortage in all typology categories and of the respondents that identified their typology (not all did), the numbers of current unfilled positions are distributed as follows:

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<th>Typology</th>
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Of the respondents that identified their typology (not all did), the numbers of 5-year predicted unfilled positions are distributed as follows:

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<th>Typology</th>
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From the survey data, (which represents one third of all school districts) it appears that the current unfilled position numbers are greatest in Typology 8, the urban – high student poverty and high student population category – with 33 total unfilled positions. A total of 8 school districts are within this typology with 200,000 total students. The next highest number of unfilled positions is in Typology 7, the urban, high student poverty and average student population category, with 30 unfilled positions. A total of 47 school districts make up this category with 210,000 total students. The third highest number comes from Typology 5, the suburban, low student poverty and average student population category, with 22 unfilled positions. A total of 77 school districts are in this category with 320,000 total students.

For projected five-year unfilled positions, the numbers are significantly higher among all typologies with the highest number, 73 from Typology 5 districts, followed by 55 from Typology 7, and 38 from Typology 1, the rural, high student poverty and small student population, and 33 from Typology 8.

Clearly the demand for school psychologists is exceeding the supply. Ohio has nine school psychology training institutions: Cleveland State University; John Carroll University; Kent State University; Miami University; Ohio State University; University of Cincinnati; University of Dayton; University of Toledo and Youngstown State University. The state budget typically provides funding to place approximately 100 interns in school districts during their last year of a three-year graduate program (this state funding line item has been flat funded for 8 years). The goal of the training programs is to collectively graduate 100 interns. Because of a number of factors, including attrition rates of students, and for some universities difficulty hiring sufficient faculty numbers, the training programs have not achieved this goal in recent years. However, for the 2016-17 intern class, the projected number of interns graduating is approximately 90, including those from out-of-state programs being supervised by Ohio training institutions. Interns who accept an ODE-funded internship commit to work in Ohio following graduation; it is a criterion that they are asked to meet as a condition of receiving a paid internship.

**What Has Been Done in the Past to Place School Psychologists in Underserved Areas of the State?**

Before the shortages became more widespread in this past school year, there were more long-term unfilled shortages in more rural and poorer school districts; these areas of the state were more chronically underserved. In the past, OSPA worked
with the IUC of School Psychology (the nine training program faculty) as well as ESCs from those areas of the state to seek a way to place interns in those underserved areas. In 2005, the University of Dayton, in cooperation with Shawnee State University, developed a recruitment and retention plan to recruit school psychology students already living, and in some cases working as teachers, in these underserved school districts. UD has a program offering a part-time option among the Ohio programs, which enabled them to develop a part-time program with UD curricula taught at Shawnee State University to graduate two cohort groups and place them in the approved school district intern sites. UD was provided with funding from ODE to establish this program, as it added overhead costs to their existing program, and UD administrators required that it be cost neutral. Sixteen students graduated from this program. While the intention was that all would ultimately work in rural underserved counties in southern and southeastern Ohio, some students sought positions closer to Columbus or Cincinnati upon graduation. The program resulted in placing a total of 14 school psychologists in the school districts in the following underserved counties: Scioto, Adams, Pike, Jackson, Lawrence, Ross, Highland, Hocking, Clermont. One student took a job with Region 14 State Support Team covering Adams, Brown, Highland, Clinton, and Fayette counties.

This UD/Shawnee State partnership was designed to be short-term and therefore ended after the second cohort group graduated. The program was difficult to sustain at the time due to funding concerns, difficulty in recruiting qualified candidates, and challenges related to UD faculty supervising interns placed in more remote areas of the state.

In addition to this initiative, IUC of School Psychology has developed a process to place interns from outside Ohio, frequently in collaboration with Marshall University, in intern sites in underserved areas of Ohio, targeting southeast Ohio. Faculty from the Ohio-approved training programs supervise these interns; their numbers vary each year. The average in recent years has been about 5 interning in Ohio each school year.

**What Can Be Done: Recommendations to Address the Issues That Contribute to the Shortage**

The OSPA/IUC joint task force members are a diverse group of OSPA members, as well as a few invited guests from ESCs. They are listed at the end of this report. Members of the task force include representatives of the university training
programs, suburban school districts, and ESCs serving all types of school districts, particularly those serving more rural school districts.

The task force determined early in the process that in order to proceed, we needed to collect more current data to quantify the severity of the shortage and, if possible, to identify areas of the state where shortages are most acute and longer term. Some of the task force members are working in areas of the state that are having great difficulty filling vacancies. One meeting was devoted to identifying barriers negatively impacting recruitment and retention of school psychologist candidates, as well as suggesting action that would address the identified barriers.

The following barriers were identified:

1) For underserved schools: placing interns in certain rural areas of the state is more difficult because of the lack of an Ohio-approved school psychology university training program in the SE area of the state. Some universities are reluctant to place interns in these areas of the state because of required on-campus internship courses and the difficulty of providing adequate (university-based) supervision at distant sites.

2) Assuring that intern placement sites meet the training experience requirements of a comprehensive multi-tiered service provision in order to be approved for placement of interns.

3) Reluctance on the part of interns and first-year school psychologists to relocate to more rural areas.

4) Issues of student capacity and internship attrition rates for some universities. For programs to maintain NASP approval, the student-to-faculty ratio must not exceed 12:1. The attrition rate in projected interns is because of several factors including doctoral interns obtaining APPIC internships, students postponing internship because of medical reasons, students electing to complete out-of-state internships, students failing to advance in programs, and student withdrawals. Currently there is an approximate 10% attrition rate.

5) Ohio does have a process to approve and accept out-of-state interns (typically 4 or 5 out-of-state interns are placed annually) if there are state intern funds available; however, the process is time consuming and
problematic, as students are not able to be assured placement until later in the spring of the year before the internship year begins.

6) University training programs are limited to accepting no more than 12 students per cohort group because of accreditation requirements and trainer/student supervision rules.

7) It is more difficult to recruit school psychologists to underserved school districts in rural areas as the candidates frequently are reluctant to relocate; the salaries and benefits are typically lower than in urban or suburban school districts, and the caseloads are typically higher.

8) Rural area school districts also typically require school psychologists to cover more than one school building with greater travel distances between.

9) Intern school psychologists seeking jobs also consider job satisfaction factors when applying. They wish to practice in environments where multi-tiered systems of supports are in place to address students’ academic and behavioral health needs; they wish to work on teams adept in these best practices. This impacts both recruiting and retaining early career school psychologists.

10) There is a general lack of knowledge and information about the profession of school psychology; this makes recruitment more difficult, and negatively impacts the goal of a more diverse pool of school psychologists.

11) The state funding for the intern program has been level-funded for 8 years, and funds approximately 100 interns. If universities accept and place more than 100, additional state funding would be necessary.

The task force members agreed that recommendations to address these and other barriers should focus on the following goals:

- Workforce supply: Assuring the maximum number of school psychologist interns graduate from the nine approved state university programs;
- Recruitment: Promoting the profession of school psychology to more high school and undergraduate students, as well as the general public, to recruit
highly motivated and more diverse students to the school psychology graduate programs.

- Retention: Retaining school psychologists in underserved school districts.

The task force recognized that the school psychologist shortage is a national as well as state problem. Education staffing shortages among certain teaching categories as well as other related service providers are occurring in many states. Therefore, we thought it best to make recommendations for all policymakers, including those at the local, state and national levels. We also discussed recommendations that could be implemented in the near future and those that would take a longer-term timetable.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Recommendations for Local Policy Makers:** School boards, ESC and other school district superintendents and school administrators, school psychologist supervisors, school psychologists and local union representatives and community leaders:

1) Many school districts are exploring creative **financial incentive proposals** to both recruit and retain school psychologists. The task force recommends school districts review their local policies and focus on those that could be revised with the goal of recruiting and retaining staff. Examples of more immediate creative initiatives that could be considered include: full or partial tuition reimbursement, support for student loan payments, retention stipends, work-related mileage stipends, reimbursement for professional development and or professional association dues. The task force understands that collective bargaining agreements may be another barrier to these options; however, local policy makers should include union representatives, working together with school administrators and school psychologists on identifying the right incentives to meet the districts recruitment and retention goals.

2) In addition to financial incentive proposals, we know that school psychology interns and early career professionals prefer to work in school districts where the quality of the job is most fulfilling. The task force recommends that school districts consider and implement **job quality enhancement initiatives**. Examples of these include: providing clerical support, providing adequate planning and consultative time, paying for professional development opportunities; and developing mentoring programs. A more systemic approach that takes a more long-
term commitment is developing school-based teams, including school psychologists, to fully implement a multi-tiered system of academic and behavioral supports for students.

3) The university training programs already are working with underserved districts to assist in the development of some of these initiatives. The task force recommends that **school districts communicate regularly with the nine programs** regarding their school psychology staffing needs and recruitment and retention efforts.

**Recommendations for State Policy Makers: university training programs, Ohio Board of Regents, ODE/State Board of Education, OSPA and state legislators:**

1) **The IUC of school psychology**, representing the nine graduate schools, is already focusing on efforts to maximize their program numbers, which equate to accepting about 12 students in each yearly graduate cohort group. Currently there are 99 interns for the 2015-16 year and there are expected to be about 90 for the 2016-17 year, depending on the number of out-of-state students who are placed in Ohio. IUC is also working on ways of addressing the current 10% attrition rate in 3-year projections for the Ohio Internship Program. One possible solution being discussed is proposing that OEC/ODE guarantee additional funding beyond 100 interns (current state budget limitation) enabling the programs to accept more than allowed by current numbers and allowing them to account for attrition rates. Discussions are underway with OEC to determine if this is possible, and the OEC Director has indicated support for this for up to 103 funded intern placements. **The task force recommends that IUC continue to work on maximizing their program numbers and minimizing the attrition rate. Additionally, we recommend that ODE/OEC approve the funding for up to 103 interns in future years, which will also help address the attrition problem.**

2) The IUC of school psychology in collaboration with OSPA, ODE, ESCs and school districts has been and will continue to prioritize the school psychology staffing needs of underserved school districts.

**The task force recommends the training programs through IUC and in collaboration with OSPA, ODE, ESCs and other school districts continue to develop a plan for improved recruitment and retention of school psychologists for employment in underserved areas of the state.** The plan should address recruitment and retention initiatives, including recruiting more potential school psychology students who reside in underserved areas, placing
more interns in underserved school districts, and assisting districts in the
development of retention plans that could include job quality enhancement
options as well as financial incentive options. The plan should also address the
issue of working with districts to enable them to provide the required intern
training experiences to assure they meet the criteria to be an approved intern
placement site. One major barrier is the lack of an approved school psychology
training program in the southeastern quadrant of the state. A collaborative
advocacy plan to seek placement of a training program in this underserved area
is also recommended.

3) ODE and the Office for Exceptional Children (OEC) can be a valuable
partner with OSPA and the IUC of School Psychology as we address these critical
shortage issues. Our collective mission: improving service delivery to students
and closing achievement gaps for those most at risk is at the heart of all we do.
The task force recommends that ODE support the following:

In collaboration with OSPA, IUC of School Psychology Training Programs,
representatives from ESCs, and representatives from underserved school
districts, develop a targeted plan to address the recruitment and retention of
school psychologists in underserved school districts. It is recommended that
ODE facilitate this by:

• Tracking school psychologist staffing needs, dedicating a staff member to
determine current, real time unfilled positions and longer-term unfilled
positions and share this information regularly with OSPA and IUC. This
data would be used in the development of the OSPA/IUC/ODE
collaborative plan to address the recruitment and retention school
psychologist staffing needs in underserved school districts.
• Assisting school districts experiencing unfilled positions by connecting
them with university training programs and OSPA, as well as providing
resources to districts on ways they can better recruit school psychology
job applicants by providing examples of incentives that are working in
other underserved districts.
• Considering providing additional funding to underserved districts as well
as the university training programs to be used for innovative recruitment
and retention proposals.
• Collaborating with higher education officials to explore an action plan for
establishing a school psychology training program in the southeastern
quadrant of the state, including incentive funding (tuition reimbursement
or tuition stipends) to be awarded to graduates who take first jobs in underserved school districts. Funding could also be awarded for retention bonus stipends after the first year of employment.

- Providing additional funding to incentivize university training programs to develop specific alternative programs for the purpose of placing interns in underserved school districts (similar to the UD/Shawnee State collaborative). Some universities are already exploring these options with school districts; however, it is solely dependent on the ability of the district to come up with financial incentives. State funding support for this would make this more attainable to more districts.

- Providing additional state funding to fund up to 103 interns in future years.

- Adding school psychologist to the official federal department of education list of shortages to enable school psychologists’ employed in underserved schools to be eligible for student loan forgiveness programs.

4) **OSPA, working with the IUC of School Psychology, ODE and NASP also must undertake a renewed and vigorous effort to produce a proactive action plan to raise public awareness about the profession of school psychology.** Such a plan’s goal would be to encourage promising high school students to explore this career path in our Ohio-approved programs. The task force recommends that OSPA undertake this effort and consider the following elements when doing so:

- Developing the plan in collaboration with the education associations representing elementary, middle and high school principals, and middle and high school counselors.

- Developing educational information regarding what a school psychologist does; identify the potential recipients of this information; develop a systematic plan for distributing this information using a multi-media approach.

- Involving representatives from undergraduate programs such as psychology, teacher education and counseling, seek their knowledge of how best to educate their students about the profession of school psychology. Distribute promotional materials to these programs in Ohio and in other states.

- Encouraging OSPA and IUC members to be available to provide school psychology career information to middle and high school students in school districts where they work or near where they reside. Encourage
them to make local connections with principals, teachers and school counselors and community-based youth group leaders.

- Developing a section of the OSPA website that could be a resource for school districts to use when considering innovative recruitment and retention ideas, include school psychology career information that could be used in school district’s career counseling initiatives.

**OSPA must be the driving force** to sustain this multi-layered and interconnected action-oriented plan to address this serious state shortage of school psychologists. **The Task Force recommends that OSPA continue to emphasize the importance of regularly collecting data on the school psychologists’ supply and demand numbers.** Data derived from this should be used to adjust the action plan if needed. OSPA should continue to work with interested stakeholder groups, listen to their input and revise the action plan according to the most acute shortage areas of the state.

5) **State Board of Education and Ohio General Assembly members** support of these initiatives will be necessary in order to seek targeted funding for school districts, ESCs and university programs to develop innovative recruitment and retention initiatives for the purpose of hiring and keeping school psychologists in underserved school districts. The Task Force recommends distributing these recommendations to key policy makers, including the State Board of Education, the Senate and House leadership and the Chairs and members of the respective Education Committees.

6) **USDOE staff and Ohio members of Congress** also need to be made aware of the severity of the shortage, as federal funding could also be sought and committed to underserved school districts. The Task Force recommends distributing this report and recommendations to Ohio members of Congress as well as NASP lobbyists who could then determine which USDOE staff would be the most interested and willing to assist.

**How Will the School Psychologist’s Shortage Impact Services to Ohio’s Students?**

We know that students across all socio-economic groups are coming to school with more severe behavioral health needs than in the past, serious depression issues, suicide ideation, and other mental health related illnesses are prevalent. The numbers of students in poverty is also increasing; these students frequently have
more unmet health, behavioral health and learning needs. Even in metropolitan areas of the state, there are insufficient behavioral health services available to children and adolescents; in rural areas these services are extremely hard to find. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in children identified with autism spectrum disorders.

School psychologists are uniquely trained to assist teachers and administrators in developing multi-tiered systems of supports and interventions to address both academic and behavioral health needs of students. Along with other essential members of school teams, including teachers, school nurses, school counselors, school social workers, intervention specialists, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists, the collective goal is to have all students thrive and achieve.

The current school psychologist shortage numbers, based on the recent survey data indicate that between 10,591 – 11,926 students will go un-served. This is assuming average caseloads of 89, and based on the range of current unfilled positions (119-134). Five years out, with no changes in supply and demand, the numbers are worse; with the same caseload assumption the numbers of un-served students could grow to 24,653 – 27,768 (range of unfilled positions 277-312).

Moving Forward: What it Will Take to Reach Our Goals

Moving forward and achieving these goals of providing enough well trained school psychologists to meet the needs of Ohio’s students will require ongoing collaboration and commitment among the stakeholders mentioned in this report. OSPA and the IUC of School Psychology must enlist members’ and interested stakeholders’ advocacy to assure these recommendations do not end up on policy makers’ shelves and never considered or acted upon. Persistence and education about the severity of the problem will be the key that unlocks possible action.

Approved by Task Force Members: October 12, 2016