



The Impact of Federal Support for School Mental Health Services

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School psychologists are uniquely qualified school mental health professionals who support students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. They apply expertise in mental health, learning, and behavior to help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. School psychologists and other qualified school mental health professionals partner with families and educators to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community.^{1,2} The shortage of school psychologists in the United States limits access to comprehensive school psychological services, including mental and behavioral health services for elementary and secondary students.

Most students who need mental and behavioral health services do not receive them. Of those who do, the vast majority access these services at school, and students are much more likely to seek out mental health services if they are available in the school setting. As such, schools represent an ideal setting to provide comprehensive school mental health services, including prevention and early intervention, for all students.^{3,4} Research indicates that school mental health services contribute to reduced absenteeism as well as improved emotional and behavioral outcomes, attendance, academic performance, and engagement in academic activities.⁵ The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of 1 school psychologist for every 500 students to facilitate comprehensive service delivery to all students.⁶ However, national ratio for the 2023–2024 school year is one school psychologist for every 1,065 students, more than twice the NASP recommendation, with many locales reaching a ratio of greater than 1:2,000.⁷ In order to meet the professionally recommended ratio nationally, one analysis suggests the United States would need to add approximately 45,000 fully prepared school psychologists to the existing workforce⁸.

Shortages in school psychology primarily stem from two root issues—recruitment and retention. Recruitment refers to challenges recruiting students and faculty to graduate education programs to increase the number and diversity of properly trained and fully qualified school psychologists; difficulty attracting school psychologists to fill available vacancies, particularly in rural and other hard-to-staff areas; and lack of financial resources for districts to hire school psychologists. Retention includes difficulties in retaining existing school psychologists, often due to limited role, insufficient professional

¹ National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d.). *Who are school psychologists*. <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/who-are-school-psychologists>

² Murphy, J. M., Able, M. R., Hoover, S., Jelinek, M., & Fazel, M. (2017). Scope, scale, and dose of the world's largest School-Based Mental Health programs. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 25(5), 218–228. <https://doi.org/10.1097/hrp.0000000000000149>.

³ McDaid, D., Park, A.-L., & Wahlbeck, K. (2019). The economic case for the prevention of mental illness. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 40, 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040617-013629>

⁴ Duong, M. T., Bruns, E. J., Lee, K., Cox, S., Coifman, J., Mayworm, A., & Lyon, A. R. (2021). Rates of mental health service utilization by children and adolescents in schools and other common service settings: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 48(3), 420–439. doi: 10.1007/s10488-020-01080-9

⁵ Kase, C., Hoover, S., Boyd, G., West, K. D., Dubenitz, J., Trivedi, P. A., Peterson, H. J., & Stein, B. D. (2017). Educational outcomes associated with school behavioral health interventions: A review of the literature. *The Journal of School Health*, 87(7), 554–562. doi: 10.1111/josh.12524

⁶ National Association of School Psychologists. (2020b). *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists*. <https://www.nasponline.org/x55315.xml>

⁷ Affrunti, N. W. (2025, April). *2023–2024 Ratio of Students to Full-Time Equivalent School Psychologists in U.S. Public Elementary and Secondary Schools* [Data brief]. National Association of School Psychologists.

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics. (2025). Common Core of Data (CCD), State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey, 2023–2024 [Data set]. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccddata.asp>

development, lack of resources to compete with districts offering higher salaries, and burnout. Consequences of the shortages include unmanageable caseloads; limited availability of academic interventions and supports; lack of support for families; and limited, or no, access to mental and behavioral health services for some students. As such, remedying the shortages in school psychology has been a key element of NASP's strategic plan and advocacy efforts over the past decade.

Two federal grant programs explicitly focus on addressing the shortages of school mental health professionals—the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program (MHSP) and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program (SBMH). Passed into law in 2018, the MHSP grant is a workforce development program designed to increase the number of properly trained and fully credentialed school psychologists and other school mental health professionals.⁹ In 2019, the SBMH grant program was passed into law to support state education agencies' (SEAs) and local education agencies' (LEAs) efforts to recruit and retain school psychologists and other school mental health professionals in high-need schools to increase their capacity to support student mental health needs.¹⁰ Both programs were later authorized with supplemental funding in 2022. While these programs help to address workforce shortages of all school mental health professionals, this paper analyzes the results from grantees addressing school psychology shortages.

NASP conducted live interviews and surveys to understand the impact of various strategies to address the shortages of school psychologists, with a focus on strategies and solutions supported by the MHSP and SBMH grant programs. After more than 2 years of grant implementation, interim results have demonstrated significant strides in addressing workforce shortages and identifying workforce shortage solutions.¹¹ Data from the first year of the programs showed that nearly 775,000 elementary and secondary students were served, 1,296 school mental health professionals were hired and 13,155 were retained, 1,191 students were placed in practica at schools, and 1,767 providers entered the graduate training programs.¹² Further, promising data from sampled programs showed a 50% reduction in suicide risk at high-needs schools¹³, decreases in absenteeism and behavioral issues, and increases in positive student-staff engagement. Additionally, the programs in this analysis demonstrated promising results for workforce improvements, including a 95% retention rate for new and existing professionals, an 80% reduction in student wait times for school mental health services, and a 33% increase in school psychologists employed by SBMH grantee respondents.¹⁴ Such improvements in the root causes of the shortage of school psychologists, especially in a relatively short period of time, demonstrate the significant and measurable value of these programs to both the field and to children and youth.

NASP continuously provides up-to-date resources and best practices to address workforce shortages, including strategies that support high-quality professional retention and respecialization, as well as outreach to current and prospective undergraduate students. Nearly all MHSP and SBMH grantees actively employ one or more of the strategies or best practices highlighted in the Shortages in School Psychology Resource Guide¹⁵ to build and sustain the necessary infrastructure to support effective and comprehensive school mental health service delivery in their communities, which includes working toward meeting the recommended ratio of school psychologists to students. Grantees are utilizing key strategies, including "Grow Your Own" Programs to recruit and retrain professionals already within high

⁹ Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2019, Public Law No. 116-6 (02/15/2019)

¹⁰ Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020, Public Law No. 116-93 (12/20/2019)

¹¹ The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) conducted qualitative interviews with grantees in 25 states and an additional online survey with almost half of the current 112 grantees to understand their main priorities, successes, challenges, and areas of innovation in implementing the grant. This analysis does not include the first cohort that was funded in 2019 and 2020. It focuses on the cohort of grants awarded via FY22 appropriations and BSCA.

¹² Mental Health Evaluation, Training, Research, and Innovation Center in Schools (METRICS). 2025. Annual performance review data. metricscenter.org

¹³ High-needs local education agency as defined in section 201 of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1021).

¹⁴ Statistics gathered from summary data from the 54 respondents of the survey sent out to 112 grantees with a school psychology focus.

¹⁵ National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d.-g). *Shortages in school psychology: Resource guide*.

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-psychology/shortages-in-school-psychology-resource-guide-x62319>

needs communities, financial support via stipends and tuition support, hybrid training programs to combat rural disparities, and access to professional development for existing staff.

Still, grantees faced challenges—an insufficient pool of candidates, high staff caseloads and turnover, and few resources for rural and underserved communities to competitively recruit candidates. However, data from this analysis indicates that these challenges can be overcome by continuing federal, state, and local support for the school psychology pipeline as a key strategy in addressing rising youth mental health needs and supporting students' academic success. This paper includes recommendations and considerations for policy makers as they continue expanding the school-based mental health workforce and responding to the youth mental health crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Children's access to school mental and behavioral health services is critical because early unaddressed signs of distress are associated with subsequent difficulties in educational, social, and occupational accomplishments in adulthood.¹⁶ Wellness promotion programs support students by strengthening relationships, inducing more intense and more frequent positive emotional experiences, and fostering students' human agency and self-determination.¹⁷ Early intervention programs address early symptoms of maladjustment before students meet the diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder. By reducing the prevalence and severity of mental and behavioral health problems in children and youth and by fostering students' psychological well-being through early intervention, prevention, and wellness promotion, interventions can be more effective and less costly than remedial interventions.¹⁸

Schools are on the frontlines of the youth mental health crisis, yet most schools and districts lack the full resources and staffing capacity to support the mental and behavioral health needs of every child. In many communities, schools are the only place children can access mental health services, especially in rural and underserved areas. Importantly, more than 80% of parents and families believe schools should provide school mental health services, supports, and resources, including at least one school-employed mental health professional¹⁹. However, in 2024, 59% of public schools cited insufficient school mental health professional staff coverage as a factor limiting their ability to effectively provide mental health services.²⁰ Meanwhile, suicide and drug overdose remain the leading causes of death for youth, sounding the alarm for bold action to interrupt these trends.²¹ School mental health services improve school climate,²² student emotional behavioral outcomes, attendance, academic performance, and engagement in academic activities.²³ Research has shown that school-based mental health services can reduce rates of absenteeism by 50% and rates of tardiness by 25%.²⁴ Comprehensive school mental health services are critical to supporting student learning and academic achievement, with research

¹⁶ Masten, A. S., Lucke, C. M., Nelson, K. M., & Stallworthy, I. C. (2021). Resilience in development and psychopathology: Multisystem perspectives. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 17, 521–549. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-120307>

¹⁷ Suldo, S. M., & Doll, B. (2021). Conceptualizing youth mental health through a dual-factor model. In P. J. Lazarus, S. M. Suldo, & B. Doll (Eds.), *Fostering the emotional wellbeing of youth: A school-based approach* (pp. 40–60). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/med-psych/9780190918873.003.0002>

¹⁸ McDaid, D., Park, A-L., & Wahlbeck, K. (2019). The economic case for the prevention of mental illness. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 40, 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040617-013629>

¹⁹ Parent and Child Mental Health Survey, April 2024. See: <https://confidentconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Wave2-Survey-findings.pdf>

²⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, School Pulse Panel 2021–22, 2022–23, 2023–24, and 2024–25.

²¹ Cunningham, R. M., Walton, M. A., & Carter, P. M. (2018). The Major Causes of Death in Children and Adolescents in the United States. *The New England journal of medicine*, 379(25), 2468–2475. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMSr1804754>

²² DiGirolamo, A. M., Desai, D., Farmer, D., McLaren, S., Whitmore, A., McKay, D., Fitzgerald, L., Pearson, S., & McGiboney, G. (2020). Results From a Statewide School-Based Mental Health Program: Effects on School Climate. *School Psychology Review*, 50(1), 81–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1837607>

²³ Murphy, J. M., Able, M. R., Hoover, S., Jelinek, M., & Fazel, M. (2017). Scope, scale, and dose of the world's largest School-Based Mental Health programs. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 25(5), 218–228. <https://doi.org/10.1097/hrp.0000000000000149>

²⁴ Kang-Yi, C. D., Wolk, C. B., Locke, J., Beidas, R. S., Lareef, I., Pisciella, A. E., Lim, S., Evans, A. C., & Mandell, D. S. (2018). Impact of school-based and out-of-school mental health services on reducing school absence and school suspension among children with psychiatric disorders. *Evaluation and program planning*, 67, 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.12.006>

demonstrating that students who receive mental health support through school-based providers perform better academically.²⁵ Children's access to school mental and behavioral health services is critical because early unaddressed signs of distress are associated with subsequent difficulties in educational, social, and occupational accomplishments in adulthood.²⁶

Both state and local education agencies report that school mental health workforce shortages leave high-needs and rural schools' positions unfilled for years on end. Even in districts that employ a school mental health professional, such workforce shortages only allow for school mental health professionals to provide services to students in crisis and leave little room for the school mental health professionals to proactively support all students and focus on prevention and early intervention. The need for relief is dire in rural and underserved communities across America, as 61% of areas with mental health workforce shortages are rural.²⁷ Without sustained efforts to increase access to school psychologists, students' academic success, attendance, and health will continue to suffer.

Background

School psychologists are professionals trained in education and psychology to help students succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally.²⁸ Services that prevent mental and behavioral health problems and promote psychological well-being are essential for school-age children and adolescents. School psychologists provide critical wellness promotion, primary prevention, early intervention, and direct mental and behavioral health services for students.²⁹ One in five school-age children experiences mental illness in a given year, but most do not receive the care they need.³⁰ Of those who do access mental health services, 70%–80% receive them at school.³¹

School psychologists are also essential members of school safety and crisis response teams. In collaboration with other professionals, school psychologists provide essential support for effective violence prevention efforts that balance physical and psychological safety and effectively identify and support students who pose a threat of harm to themselves or others. Further, school psychologists have professional training and expertise to support a school community that has experienced a tragedy in grieving, coping, and healing in the aftermath of school violence or suicide.³²

Since 2023, a combination of state and local investments with supplemental federal support has helped double the hiring of school psychologists.³³ However, schools nationwide still only have half of the school psychologists they need to meet all students' needs. During the 2023–2024 school year, the national ratio was 1:1,065. Although that remains double the professional recommendation, it represents approximately a 5% increase in full-time employed (FTE) school psychologists over the previous school

²⁵ National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d.-a). *Comprehensive school-based mental and Behavioral Health Services and school psychologists*. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/mental-and-behavioral-health/additional-resources/comprehensive-school-based-mental-and-behavioral-health-services-and-school-psychologists>

²⁶ Masten, A. S., Lucke, C. M., Nelson, K. M., & Stallworthy, I. C. (2021). Resilience in development and psychopathology: Multisystem perspectives. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 17, 521–549. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-120307>

²⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, July 23). *Child mental health: Rural policy brief*. <https://www.cdc.gov/rural-health/php/policy-briefs/child-mental-health-policy-brief.html>

²⁸ National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d). *Who are school psychologists*. <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/who-are-school-psychologists>

²⁹ McGorry, P. D., & Mei, C. (2018). Early intervention in youth mental health: progress and future directions. *Evidence-based mental health*, 21(4), 182–184. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ebmental-2018-300060>

³⁰ Bitsko, R. H., Claussen, A. H., Lichstein, J., Black, L. I., Jones, S. E., Danielson, M. L., Hoenig, J. M., Jack, S. P. D., Brody, D. J., Gyawali, S., Maenner, M. J., Warner, M., Holland, K. M., Perou, R., Crosby, A. E., Blumberg, S. J., Avenevoli, S., Kaminski, J. W., & Ghandour, R. M. (2022). Mental health surveillance among children – United States, 2013–2019. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Supplement*, 71(2), 1–42. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/su7102a1.htm>

³¹ Simon, A. E., Pastor, P. N., Reuben, C. A., Huang, L. N., & Goldstrom, I. D. (2015). Use of mental health services by children ages six to 11 with emotional or behavioral difficulties. *Psychiatric Services*, 66(9), 930–937. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201400342>

³² National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *The professional standards of the National Association of School Psychologists*. <https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/professional-ethics>

³³ Minix, G. (2023, January 4). *School psychologist compacts: What you should know*. The Council of State Governments. <https://www.csg.org/2023/01/04/school-psychologist-compacts-what-you-need-to-know/>

year (Affrunti, 2025). Still, despite this progress, an estimated 45,000 additional school psychologists are needed to meet the NASP-recommended 1:500 ratio³⁴.

There is no one root cause of workforce shortages. A number of factors contribute to the inability of states and districts to reach the needed workforce capacity, including too few school psychology graduate education programs to train new professionals, low enrollment in such programs, budget constraints at the state and local levels limiting resources to attract and hire school mental health professionals, and difficulties retaining school psychologists due to high caseloads and professional burnout.³⁵

In turn, school psychology shortages reduce students' access to preventive mental health resources, limit opportunities for early identification and early intervention, and decrease the amount of direct mental health services students receive in their schools. Unaddressed student mental health needs lead to short- and long-term health problems; lower grades; increased absenteeism, suspensions, and expulsions; and a higher risk of students dying by suicide and drug overdose.³⁶ Comparatively, schools with adequate school-based mental health providers see improvements in students' physical and mental health, grade point averages (GPAs), and attendance rates, as well as a reduction in student disciplinary infractions.³⁷

The federal government has taken actions to address the worsening youth mental health outcomes by prioritizing support for high-needs communities (e.g., areas with significant school workforce shortages, rural communities). Created in the aftermath of various episodes of school violence, including the 2018 Parkland tragedy, the MHSP grant is a workforce development program designed to increase the number of properly trained and fully credentialed school psychologists and other school mental health professionals.³⁸ In 2019, the SBMH grant program was passed into law to support SEAs, LEAs, and schools' efforts to recruit and retain school psychologists and other school mental health professionals in high-need schools to increase schools' capacity to support student mental health needs, and it was later authorized with supplement funding in 2022.³⁹ NASP successfully advocated for more funding and support to address the grave shortages across the nation and worsening mental health issues for our student populations. The MHSP grant program, first funded in FY2019, focused on school mental health workforce pipeline expansion via university-school district partnerships to train and place school-based mental health professionals in high-needs school districts. Congress provided continuation funding for this demonstration project within the bipartisan Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020 and stood up the new SBMH grant to support efforts to recruit and retain school mental health staff.^{40, 41, 42} In 2022, Congress expanded the authorization and funding for both of the bipartisan programs through September 30, 2027. In total, 362 grants have been awarded across 49 states and Puerto Rico. Grantees include those in urban, suburban, rural, and frontier locales; a map of current grantees is available via the METRICS Center.⁴³

³⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. (2025). Common Core of Data (CCD), State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey, 2023–2024 [Data set]. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccddata.asp>

³⁵ Schilling, E. J., & Randolph, M. (2021). Voices from the Field: Addressing Job Burnout in School Psychology Training Programs. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 25, 572–581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-020-00283-z>

³⁶ Independent School Management. (2023, February 12). *Understanding the impact of mental health on Academic Performance*. <https://isminc.com/advisory/publications/the-source/understanding-impact-mental-health-academic-performance>

³⁷ University of Maryland. (2003). *Outcomes of Expanded School Mental Health Programs*. Center for School Mental Health Assistance. <https://somvweb.som.umaryland.edu/Fileshare/SchoolMentalHealth/Resources/ESMH/ESMHoutcomes.pdf>

³⁸ Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2019, Public Law No. 116-6 (02/15/2019)

³⁹ Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020, Public Law No. 116-93 (12/20/2019)

⁴⁰ Conference Report to accompany H.R. 6157, <https://www.congress.gov/115/crpt/hrpt952/CRPT-115hrpt952.pdf>

⁴¹ Text - H.R.1865 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020. (2019, December 20). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1865/text>

⁴² Brogan, F. T. (2020, May 28). *Applications for New Awards; School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program*. Federal Register. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/05/28/2020-11388/applications-for-new-awards-school-based-mental-health-services-grant-program>

⁴³ <https://www.metricscenter.org/>

School Psychology Focused Grantee Data

Of the grants awarded since 2022, more than a third of both MHSP and SBMH grants have focused on addressing shortages in school psychology. While some grantees are focused on one specific district, many grants serve multiple high-needs districts that represent a diversity of locales, as defined by the National Center for NCES⁴⁴. Based on information provided in publicly available project abstracts⁴⁵, it is estimated that over the course of these 5-year grants, federal investments will support the addition of at least 1,483 fully prepared school psychologists into the workforce and support the hiring and retention of many more. This figure is likely an underestimate given that not all grantees included this level of specificity in their publicly available abstracts.

According to data from the first year of implementation of MHSP and SBMH (May 2023 to December 2023), the grantees provided mental and behavioral health services to nearly 775,000 students; 1,163 school mental health professionals were hired and 13,155 were retained; 1,191 students were placed in supervised practicum/internship at schools; and 1,767 students entered the graduate training programs.⁴⁶

Purpose

This paper examines interim findings from a sample of both grants' implementation across a large spectrum of school districts, institutions of higher education, and geographical areas, identifying key findings, successful strategies, challenges, and recommendations for future program development and implementation.

Methodology

NASP conducted qualitative interviews with grant program administrators in 25 states and quantitative outcomes metrics through surveys of 112 school psychology-focused grantees awarded in Fiscal Year 2022. NASP analyzed the implementation strategies, successes, challenges, and innovations across multiple school districts in geographically diverse areas across the country. Interviewers gave grantees the option to be cited in the White Paper or remain anonymous as part of the review process. The analysis also includes a review of publicly available information about the grantees.⁴⁷

KEY FINDINGS

The progressing grant programs are already demonstrating promising success in improving the pipeline for school psychologists and the recruitment and retention of such professionals within the schools. Below are the key findings from this analysis, along with specific successful strategies and innovations from both the MHSP and SBMH grants.

- **Access to school psychologists improves student mental health, academic, and behavioral outcomes.** Proper staffing ratios of school-based mental health professionals, particularly 1 school psychologist for every 500 students, led to increased student attendance, a reduction in assessed suicide risk, a decrease in reports for threat assessment, and improved health, safety, and academic performance of students. For example, the SBMH grant program enabled Guilford County Schools in North Carolina to achieve the NASP recommended ratio of school

⁴⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/LocaleBoundaries>

⁴⁵ <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-birth-grade-12/safe-supportive-schools/mental-health-service-professional-demonstration-grant-program#prior-year-awards>

⁴⁶ Mental Health Evaluation, Training, Research, and Innovation Center in Schools (METRICS). (2025). *Annual performance review data*. metricscenter.org

⁴⁷ For purposes of this study, a candidate is defined as an individual who is being recruited for a position or program. A practice student is an individual who is in a graduate education program who is training to be a school psychologist.

psychologists, leading to the school district serving over 1,000 students and providing 9,000 therapy sessions for students.⁴⁸ The presence of school psychologists increased student access to life-saving mental health resources and served as an early intervention in the mental health crisis.

- **Hybrid and online programs attracted a wider pool of candidates to school psychology graduate preparation programs.** Grantees leveraged hybrid and online program models to attract and recruit candidates who would otherwise not have been able to obtain the training necessary to become a school psychologist due to programmatic distances from rural areas, childcare challenges, and classes occurring during standard 9–5 work hours—particular difficulties for single parents, working professionals, and individuals in rural areas. Additionally, online programs increased access for individuals already in the field of education or psychology who were interested in professional retraining or respecializing to become school psychologists but who did not have the resources to leave their current jobs. The University of Southern Maine’s Low Residency Master’s Program is one such program empowering individuals to pursue graduate education in school psychology by eliminating barriers caused by proximity to campus, time constraints, or needs for familial support.⁴⁹
- **Building a school psychology workforce that is representative of community demographics supports student wellness and learning.** Grantees trained and recruited school psychologists to provide high-need schools with school psychologists who had backgrounds representative of the students in the school community. Research demonstrates that a more diverse workforce improves student learning and student engagement, and it can help lower additional barriers to asking for help when it is needed.⁵⁰ In addition, increasing access to multilingual school psychologists can lower barriers to family engagement and student support. For example, Boston Public Schools noted that one of their goals is “language representation”, placing emphasis on recruiting school psychologists with backgrounds linguistically representative of the student population in their district.⁵¹
- **Recruiting and retraining individuals already based in target geographical areas successfully fills local vacancies.** Filling school mental health positions in rural and low-resourced school districts has been found challenging, as not many students apply for vacancies in these areas upon graduation; grantees noted that many educators often seek positions within schools that are better-resourced or located in a suburban community. For example, despite the national standard of one school psychologist per 500 students, one school district in rural Iowa had one-eighth of that ratio: only one school psychologist per 4,000 students. One such district noted that many recent graduates and school mental health professionals prefer to live in more populated areas.

Three quarters of MHSP grantees included in this analysis incorporated “Grow Your Own” (GYO) programs to increase access to properly trained school psychologists in hard to staff locales. Such strategic programs are designed to recruit existing school staff or other community professionals to retrain or respecialize as school psychologists. These individuals were particularly adept at understanding the student bodies and the school and community cultures because they leveraged personal backgrounds and experiences like those of the children and youth they served. Additionally, these individuals demonstrated a higher likelihood of remaining within the targeted geographical communities after completing training compared to non-GYO peers. This strategy is especially successful for filling rural district vacancies—noted by many grantees as one of their biggest hurdles—and aligns with NASP recommendations to leverage

⁴⁸ A. Tabori (personal communication, November 6, 2024) shared Guilford County Schools’ experience with SBMH grant program during a live interview.

⁴⁹ J. Pratt (personal communication, October 29, 2024) shared the University of Southern Maine’s experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁵⁰ Education Commission for the States..(2020).*Building a Diverse Teacher Workforce*. [Policy Brief]. https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Building_a_Diverse_Teacher_Workforce.pdf

⁵¹ A. Amador, C. Le, & C. Hall (personal communication, December 18, 2024) shared Boston Public School’s experience with MHSP grant program during a live interview.

existing talent and retrain individuals already in the workforce and connected to the community.⁵² For example, Marshall University in West Virginia had great success with GYO programs demonstrated by the program having reached maximum enrollment, and it consistently produces fully prepared and properly credentialed school psychologists committed to remaining in the state upon graduation.⁵³

Similarly, Boston Public Schools utilized a GYO strategy to increase language representation to better serve the student population and increase engagement among bilingual families. Part of their efforts include retraining bilingual teachers and developing a plan to support parents and teachers to obtain the necessary training to become a school psychologist.⁵⁴

- **Combating burnout through strategic retention practices improves job satisfaction and staff well-being.** Grantees from both programs used financial incentives via internship stipends, sign-on bonuses, tuition reimbursements, and professional development funds to fortify the pipeline of qualified school-based mental health providers, particularly in rural districts. For example, one southern SEA utilized relocation and sign-on stipends for interns, which helped achieve a 100% intern retention rate.⁵⁵ Additionally, supporting school psychologists, practicum students', and interns' professional development, including providing professional memberships, establishing mentorship programs, and improving working conditions, has increased overall job satisfaction amongst existing school psychology staff. These strategies permit high-needs areas to compete with more populous and higher resourced districts, improve recruitment and retention of new and existing staff, and ultimately improve student outcomes. Further, many expressed that school districts face high turnover rates in part due to burnout. Districts retention practices not only allow grantees to combat burnout but also reignite mid- and late-career school psychologists' passion for their work by ensuring their needs are supported.

MHSP Grant's Successful Strategies and Innovations

The Mental Health Service Professional Grant (MHSP) attracts candidates for school-based mental health professions, including school psychology, and provides training opportunities for students in rural and other high-needs districts. MHSP facilitates partnerships between high-needs school districts and institutions of higher education,⁵⁶ allowing opportunities for practicum students and interns to obtain required clinical supervision and increase additional children and youth's access to school mental health services. The key strategies are discussed below and include relevant examples as follows.

Respecialization and Professional Training Through GYO Programs

Nearly three quarters of survey respondents prioritized improving the pipeline of school psychologists within their grants.⁵⁷ Several grantees have reported using GYO programs to help increase the pool of candidates. Grantees primarily implemented this goal through GYO programs aligning with NASP's best practices for addressing the school psychologist shortage through respecialization and professional retraining.¹⁸ GYO programs attract students for graduate education programs from areas within target high-needs communities—such as rural residents and educational support staff—which increases the likelihood that they will stay in their community upon finishing the graduate training.

⁵² National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d.). *Respecialization and Professional Retraining*.

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-psychology/shortages-in-school-psychology-resource-guide/respecialization-and-professional-retraining>

⁵³ L. Jennings-Knot, L. Meyer, & A. Saunders (personal communication, December 19, 2024) shared Marshall University's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁵⁴ A. Amador, C. Le, & C. Hall (personal communication, December 18, 2024) shared Boston Public School's experience with MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁵⁵ Anonymous (personal communication, October 31, 2024) shared their state's experience with the SBMH grant program during a live interview.

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration (MHSP) FY2022 Grant Competition Applicant and Stakeholder Resource*. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2022/10/MHSP-Brochure1.pdf>

⁵⁷ Statistics gathered from summary data from the 54 respondents of the survey sent out to all 112 grantees.

- Marshall University in West Virginia identified GYO as one of their most successful strategies for increasing the number of school psychologists. Rural residents and educational support staff candidates were more likely to stay in target areas after certification given their experience in the school district and community. In the 3 years since the grant began, Marshall's GYO school psychology degree program has reached maximum enrollment—between April 2023 and December 2024, they placed 54 interns, had 86 practicum candidates enrolled, and had 18 new school-based mental health professionals hired from their program to work in schools throughout West Virginia.⁵⁸
- A University in a Mid-Western State implemented a GYO program in partnership with three high-needs districts, one of which had no access to a school psychologist. They created a hybrid program to create access for working professionals and others for whom a full-time, in-person program was not feasible. Each year the program has had more applicants than they can accept, and plans are underway to expand support to additional districts⁵⁹.
- The University of South Dakota uses what they call a “home grown” model to identify community members and those living in or near tribal nations to become school psychologists. It was noted that in addition to poor ratios of school psychologists to students, there is also a significant amount of physical distance between available school psychologists and high-need communities. In South Dakota, they estimate that there is one school psychologist for approximately every 750 square miles. Support from this federal investment is increasing access to school psychologists across the state and has lowered barriers to allow individuals who would not have otherwise been able to obtain this kind of graduate education, including one single mother of three who was able to become a school psychologist and better support her community and her family⁶⁰.

As seen in these programs, GYO efforts recruited candidates into school psychology graduate programs that allowed them to remain in their current jobs and communities while obtaining advanced education and increasing their earning potential. This expanded the pool of fully trained school psychologists available to serve all students and families in their communities.

Transforming School Psychology Graduate Education Program Delivery

Grantees also helped drive innovative solutions to expand access to school psychology graduate education in areas with significant workforce shortages, particularly in rural communities and states with little to no availability of graduate education programs. While some school psychology graduate education programs allow for part-time enrollment or offer evening classes, most traditional programs are full-time, in-person programs, with the majority of classes occurring during the day. This presents a barrier for many people who are interested in becoming school psychologists but are unable to leave their current employment, endure long commutes, or relocate their families. These factors may potentially disincentivize many excellent candidates from pursuing school psychology even if it offers upward mobility opportunities and a prospect to obtain a fulfilling career. In turn, many grantees dismantled these barriers by adding flexibility in program delivery through online and hybrid models and offering graduate education program courses during evenings and weekends.

- Before the MHSP grant, Maine had one credentialed school psychologist in its northernmost rural county. To address this issue, one state university established a Low Residency School Psychology Program, which empowers candidates—who had historically been unable to access graduate education programs—by delivering courses online and after work hours. In doing so, the program supported the placement of 22 new school psychologists in rural Maine schools, 20% of whom are committed to serving that northernmost county after completing their fieldwork. Enrollment continues to grow, and by spring of 2025, a total of 46 school psychology graduate students will be enrolled, which includes 12 students in the low residency program. It is noted that

⁵⁸ L. Jennings-Knot, L. Meyer, & A. Saunders (personal communication, December 19, 2024) shared Marshall University's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁵⁹ Anonymous (personal communication, November 6, 2024)

⁶⁰ K. Oyen (personal communication, October 31, 2024) shared the University of South Dakota's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

this is the highest number of students ever to be enrolled in this university's school psychology program. In total, the university's grant has provided direct services to 399 students who otherwise would not have received services during the 2023–2024 academic year.⁶¹

- Prior to the grant funding, some rural schools in a midwestern state had shortages of mental health professionals for as long as 15 years. One university built a hybrid delivery model for school psychology candidates. Flexible, hybrid learning models offered by member institutions have helped one school go from no school psychologists to now having two to three school psychology candidates. Practicum students and interns provide services to students and families in LEAs within their scope of practice, including direct services such as individual and group counseling, conduct consultations with teachers and families regarding student needs, screening for social and emotional concerns, and educational sessions for families.⁶²

Flexible delivery models allowed working parents, employed school support staff, and others to gain access to this career pathway, simultaneously boosting the school mental health workforce and supporting improved student outcomes and access to school mental health services.

Tuition and Stipend Support to Recruit and Graduate Students

The average cost of a school psychology program is two thirds of the median average income in the United States, making graduate education financially untenable for many people. However, the MHSP removes this barrier by permitting grantees to provide financial assistance for tuition, transportation, and related costs. This commonsense tool enables enrollment for candidates who would otherwise not be able to afford the program, especially working parents and caregivers. In exchange for financial assistance, candidates agree to work in high-needs schools after program completion. This tactic was used widely amongst MHSP grantees. NASP found that 78% of grantees provided tuition support for graduate students, 56% provided internship stipends, and 59% provided stipends for school psychology supervisors within internship placements.⁶³ It's important to note that internships within these graduate programs are the equivalent of full-time jobs that provide interns with hands-on training and increase access to services in schools.

Additionally, stipends are vital to attract professionals to serve as supervisors for practicum students and interns conducting their required in-person experiences. A lack of supervisors has made it difficult for practicum students and interns to access this hands-on experience and complete their programs—which is a necessary component of the pipeline. Further, the placement of interns and practicum students increases access to services, supports improvements to LEA infrastructure and capacity to provide comprehensive services, and helps ensure a robust pipeline of school psychologists is available as schools expand their budgets to increase the number of available positions.

- For example, Oklahoma State University provided graduate students with tuition reimbursement and stipends, increasing the number of candidates from underrepresented populations in the field of school psychology, including Indigenous students, applying for the program and reducing the need to work second jobs.⁶⁴
- The University of Delaware similarly provided mileage reimbursement and lodging to candidates so they could complete fieldwork experiences in rural high-needs schools.⁶⁵

Financial incentives expand the pool of candidates who can serve rural and other high-needs school districts and complete their education and field experience in school psychology.

⁶¹ J. Pratt (personal communication, October 29, 2024) shared the University of Southern Maine's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁶² Anonymous (personal communication, November 6, 2024) shared a Midwestern University's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁶³ Statistics gathered from summary data from the 54 respondents of the survey sent out to all 112 grantees.

⁶⁴ S. Rich (personal communication, October 31, 2024) shared Oklahoma State University's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁶⁵ B. Zakszewski & C. Till (personal communication, October 29, 2024) shared the University of Delaware's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

Building a School Psychology Workforce Representative of Communities Served

The MHSP grant program creates opportunities for grantees to recruit and support a pool of candidates who may not have had access to a degree program prior to the grants—due to distance from campuses, financial constraints, family obligations, or lack of flexibility in their current careers. Among grantees surveyed, 68% identified “increasing the diversity of school psychologists” as a primary goal of their grant project.⁶⁶ Many grantees have expressed the goal of credentialing school psychologists who are representative of the communities they serve, focusing on recruiting candidates from rural communities, with bilingual backgrounds, or from demographics that are traditionally less represented in the school psychology workforce, such as male school psychologists.

- Marshall University leveraged tuition funding to support home-grown candidates and others, including graduate students with disabilities, those pursuing second careers, and those with children. Those interviewed reported that they believe addressing previously unmet needs such as childcare has been a factor in enabling a more expansive cohorts of students to enroll in the program.⁶⁷
- A midwestern, rural university set a goal to produce school psychologists who represent the communities they are serving, with high proportions of students in LEAs across the state coming from low-income, racially and ethnically varying, or bilingual backgrounds. To address this, the university established an online degree program to reach a broader pool of candidates, allowing opportunity for existing educators to continue working while enrolled in the program, and to complete practica and internships within their current district. The program aims to support local high-needs school districts in the surrounding area, particularly rural districts and districts with high turnover rates.⁶⁸

SBMH Program’s Successful Strategies and Innovations

The School-Based Mental Health Services Program (SBMH) provides grants to state education agencies, local education agencies (e.g., school districts), and consortia of schools to increase the number of credentialed school-based mental health professionals and improve mental health services and outcomes in high-needs areas.⁶⁹

Funding to Improve School/District Capacity to Provide Comprehensive Mental Health Services

Many SBMH grantees utilized grant resources to provide stipends and bonuses to bolster recruitment and retention in high-needs areas across the country. Financial incentives make underserved and rural schools competitive with more affluent school districts to fill longstanding vacancies.

- Guilford County Schools in North Carolina used grant funds to attract and retain qualified mental health professionals. They offered signing and retention bonuses for all school-based mental health professionals, provided internship stipends for six to eight interns per year, covered professional development opportunities for staff, and funded an outreach program to build relationships with neighboring universities. These benefits allowed the district to fully staff all allocated school-based mental health positions and improve student mental health outcomes. During the 2023–2024 school year, Guilford County Schools provided over 9,000 therapy sessions to their student body and achieved up to a 50% risk reduction in suicide in some schools.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Statistics gathered from summary data from the 54 respondents of the survey sent out to all 112 grantees.

⁶⁷ L. Jennings-Knot, L. Meyer, & A. Saunders (personal communication, December 19, 2024) shared Marshall University’s experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁶⁸ Anonymous (personal communication, October 28, 2024) shared a rural Midwestern university’s experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). School based Mental Health Services (SBMH) FY2024 Grant Competition Stakeholder Resource. https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2024/03/SBMH-Brochure_FY24.pdf

⁷⁰ A. Tabori (personal communication, November 6, 2024) shared Guilford County Schools’ experience with SBMH grant program during a live interview.

- Fairfax County School District in Virginia saw a threefold increase in its yearly hiring of school psychologists. This allowed more school psychologists to work full-time in one school instead of across multiple campuses. Increased staffing and correspondingly reduced caseloads made it easier for these professionals to build relationships with students and parents, and to serve in permanent roles on multitiered system of support (MTSS) teams and student clubs, which provides mental health prevention and intervention services for students beyond minimal services previously provided.⁷¹

These strategies improved overall job satisfaction and strengthened relationships and cohesion across departments, including with school counselors and social workers who are now better able to collaborate and work with each other to respond to student needs. Prior to receiving the grant, these more expansive services would not have been feasible for schools due to staffing shortages, in turn limiting the existing school psychologists to serving multiple locations with only minimal services.

Improving Retention Through New Professional Development Opportunities

NASP has long recommended ongoing, relevant professional development and growth opportunities as a means to boost retention and job satisfaction among school psychologists. Many school districts lack the capacity to provide professional development specifically related to the work of school psychologists.⁷² However, with SBMH funding, 71% of grantees prioritized and integrated professional development strategies for staff recruitment and retention.²¹ Grantees provided opportunities for professional collaboration and financial support for school psychologists to attend professional conferences and workshops. In turn, school psychologists were able to refine their existing competencies, expand their skill sets, and ensure their services continue to align with the most current school psychology research. This, in turn, improved retention, bolstered job satisfaction, and ultimately improved the quality of services provided to students and families, thus improving students' mental and academic outcomes.

For example, Indiana's Hamilton Southeastern School District and Virginia's Fairfax County School District provide professional membership dues as a benefit to attract new hires and retain current staff.^{73,49} School psychology staff are able to attend conferences and access resources they previously could not, allowing them to expand their skill sets as providers and establish relationships with other professionals in the school-based mental health community. Fairfax also brought in guest speakers, aiming to ensure their staff felt well supported among an exodus of mid- and late-career staff due to burnout, low pay, and compassion fatigue.

Additionally, grantees expanded mentorship programs to support school psychologists new to the profession.

- In one southern state, supervisors noted that one unexpected success to come out of their mentorship program was a two-way learning process between student interns and their supervisors within the school. The interns helped supervisors learn new strategies and tactics emerging in the field of school psychology, improving the existing school staff's work and job satisfaction while enabling mentorship and growth for interns in the program.⁷⁴
- Anne Arundel County Public Schools is launching an innovative mentorship initiative that empowers employees through targeted professional development opportunities, fostering leadership excellence across our district. This strategic program strengthens the school psychology workforce by combining powerful recruitment and retention strategies with meaningful

⁷¹ M. Axler, D. Desaulniers, C. Summers & L. Ottehenning (personal communication, November 8, 2024) shared Fairfax Country School District's experience with SBMH grant program during a live interview.

⁷² National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d.). *Retention Strategies*. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-psychology/shortages-in-school-psychology-resource-guide/retention-strategies-x62375>

⁷³ M. Kirwan (personal communication, January 7, 2025) shared Hamilton Southeastern School District's experience with the SBMH grant program during a live interview.

⁷⁴ Anonymous (personal communication, October 31, 2024) shared their state's experience with the SBMH grant program during a live interview.

peer connections, enabling staff to cultivate robust support networks while enhancing their professional capabilities and expertise.⁷⁵

Increasing Awareness of the Profession

In the past, school psychologists had a narrower role focused on assessing, identifying, and serving students in special education. Additionally, there is a lack of knowledge that the career of school psychologist exists, meaning potential candidates miss out on exploring this career opportunity. In turn, increased promotion and outreach to prospective candidates at all stages of their careers, including undergraduate and high school promotion of the field, has been an important tool in building a strong workforce.⁷⁶ The SBMH grant provides an allowable use for states and school districts to raise awareness about the field of school psychology to prospective candidates in their areas, aligning with NASP's recommendations for promoting recruitment and retention in school psychology.⁷⁷ Some grantees even conducted informational sessions at high schools and in undergraduate programs to increase interest and establish a new pipeline of candidates not previously exposed to such work.

For example, one school district utilized grant funding to expand their outreach to undergraduate students, hosted informational meetings for current educators, and set up conference booths. As a direct result of implementing these recruitment practices, 300 people expressed interest in becoming a school psychologist in their community.⁷⁸

Outreach efforts targeted toward incoming generations of students increase awareness of career opportunities within the field of school psychology and attract candidates who want to support youth development.

Leveraging Partnerships With Universities to Recruit School Psychology Candidates Who Are Representative of Communities They Serve

Several grantees rely on partnerships with nearby universities that offer school psychology degree programs to recruit practicum students to high-needs LEAs. Leveraging these existing partnerships support seamless integration of practicum students and interns into nearby school districts. This strategy addresses recruitment and retention needs in areas that have historically struggled with high turnover rates or lack of applicants, issues frequently seen in rural and high-needs districts.

- One SEA indicated their statewide goal is to place 350 mental health providers across 40 rural school districts throughout the state. They are working with nearby universities with hybrid delivery models and advising to increase the pool of candidates who can participate in the program as a means to support a robust workforce representative of the students within their communities.⁷⁹
- One of the primary goals of Portland Public Schools's (PPS) SBMH grant is to increase the number of school psychologists, including diverse and multilingual practitioners, with particular focus on serving the needs of 25 Title I schools highlighting the provision of mental health services. The grant has provided over 6,000 students access to school-based mental health services. The PPS Comprehensive School Psychologist program has been highlighted as a promising practice by Oregon Governor Kotek's Office of Education. Additionally, the LEA collaborates with several university institutions, recruiting via conferences and outreach to colleges and universities to attract school psychologists, including diverse and multilingual

⁷⁵ K. Anderson (personal communication, November 15, 2024) shared Anne Arundel County Public Schools' experience with the SBMH grant program during a live interview.

⁷⁶ National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d.). *Vision, core purpose, core values, & strategic goals*.

<https://www.nasponline.org/utility/about-nasp/vision-core-purpose-core-values-and-strategic-goals>

⁷⁷ National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (n.d.). *General recommendations*. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-psychology/shortages-in-school-psychology-resource-guide/general-recommendations>

⁷⁸ Anonymous (personal communication, November 1, 2024) shared their school district's experience with the SBMH grant program during a live interview.

⁷⁹ Anonymous (personal communication, November 12, 2024) shared their state's experience with the SBMH grant program during a live interview.

candidates, to Portland to address unmet mental health needs of students in the district. Further, the grant has expanded PPS's Dialectical Behavior Therapy program. This program has resulted in significant decreases in student anxiety and depression.⁸⁰

Challenges With Implementation and Recommended Solutions

Despite federal support in improving the pipeline and hiring new school-based mental health professionals, school districts experienced challenges in recruiting and retaining candidates and supervisors, as well as managing the administrative burden required by the federal grant process. Additionally, school mental health professionals face high demands in communities when there is a lack of resources to fund the need. Below provides summaries of challenges that university and school district grantees expressed during NASP's data collection.

Recruitment Challenges for Rural and Other High-Needs Areas

Universities and school districts experienced challenges in recruiting candidates for school psychology degree programs and filling vacancies with existing school psychologists due to geographical barriers and family obligations of prospective candidates. Rural districts struggle with recruitment, as many candidates are hesitant to relocate.

For example, current MHSP grantees reported the following:

- "Many of our LEAs are rural and so do not attract as many applicants because not everyone wants to live in a rural environment, and housing shortages and commute/travel time create barriers. We also have LEAs who have school psychologists who could not find childcare (or affordable quality childcare) and have decided to work part-time or not at all given the childcare options and their family needs," stated Minnesota State University Moorhead.⁸¹
- "There are only two programs in the state, and they are both in the eastern side of the state and in more urban areas. This limitation significantly impacts rural districts' ability to recruit and retain qualified professionals," said a rural Midwestern University.⁸²

Recommendations to Address Recruitment Challenges

- GYO programs: Fortifying the pipeline from university programs to school placements will be a multiyear effort due to the intensive training that school psychologists receive, including 3 years of postgraduate education and field training, plus the severity of the current shortage. NASP estimates that it will take more than 20 years to create a workforce that meets the national standards of 1 school psychologist for every 500 students⁸³. It is critical to leverage the existing pool of candidates already in rural and high-needs areas, as those candidates will be most willing to accept placements within their communities. Policy makers in turn can incentivize GYO programs to recruit local practicum students and professionals to work in their communities.
- Retraining/Respecialization Incentives: Approximately 43% of school psychology practicum students report that they had been employed the year before entering their school psychology program, demonstrating the vast opportunity for respecializing of existing mental health professionals or retraining of nonclinical school staff.⁸⁴ Policy makers and school districts can provide incentives to existing mental health professionals or school staff to embark upon retraining

⁸⁰ C. Velasquez, E. Hidalgo, & K. Irwin (personal communication, December 18, 2024) shared Portland Public Schools' experience with the SBMH grant program during a live interview.

⁸¹ L. Stewart (personal communication, September 2024) shared Minnesota State University Moorhead's experience with the MHSP grant program in a survey.

⁸² Anonymous (personal communication, October 31, 2024).

⁸³ National Association of School Psychologists (2021). "Improving School and Student Outcomes: The Importance of Remedying Shortages in School Psychology"[Congressional briefing]. [https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues/shortage-of-school-psychologists/improving-school-and-student-outcomes-\(video\)](https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues/shortage-of-school-psychologists/improving-school-and-student-outcomes-(video))

⁸⁴ Bocanegra, J., Rossen, E., & Grapin, S. L. (2017). *Factors associated with graduate students' decisions to enter school psychology* [Research report]. National Association of School Psychologists.

to become a school psychologist, as well as referral incentives like bonuses for staff to help recruit potential candidates for retraining.

Retention Challenges Due to School Mental Health Professional Burnout

Due to chronic understaffing of school mental health roles, current school psychologists experience high caseloads that do not allow them to provide services to some students. For example, despite the national standard of 1 school psychologist per 500 students, one LEA in rural Iowa had one-eighth that ratio—only 1 school psychologist per 4,000 students.⁸⁵ Additionally, many grantees noted high caseloads lead to high turnover rates, with professionals regularly leaving under-resourced schools, typically within rural and high-needs areas, for wealthier school districts that can meet national provider-to-student standards, allow for a more comprehensive role, and provide opportunities for professional collaboration and ongoing professional development.

Administrative Challenges Around Federal Grant and Licensing Requirements

Many grantees in rural and high-needs areas lack support both in applying for and implementing federal grants in comparison to larger and more affluent school districts. Larger and more affluent school districts can employ staff with expertise in federal and state grant application and implementation, which is often a full-time role. However, smaller and under-resourced school districts often do not have the same capacity and expertise in grant application. If they are successful in being awarded, they often lack the expertise and capacity to fulfill the grant's programmatic and financial reporting requirements.

Policy makers should ensure resources are available to support rural and smaller school districts that do not have the same resources or knowledge of the federal grant process. Providing technical assistance to schools applying for the grant helps rural and smaller school districts compete for the grants to help recruit and retain current school mental health staff. This recommendation is included as part of the “Creating Access and Resources in Education for Student Mental Health Act” led by Senator John Cornyn of Texas.

Grantees highlighted that there is not only a lack of candidates entering the field of school psychology but also a lack of supervisors for interns—a requirement for graduation and credentialing. Without sufficient supervisors, the pipeline for school psychologists will not be sustainable.

Some grantees incentivized supervision from established school psychologists by providing small financial incentives like stipends. Other grantees partnered with state mental health and psychology associations to connect supervisors to practicum students in remote or distant areas in the state by adjusting degree requirements to allow for hybrid or fully remote supervision. Additionally, ensuring proper supervision for interns is critical for learning purposes and to increase mentorship in the field. Policy makers can work to provide other financial incentives for individuals who serve as supervisors.

Universities and School Districts Miss Opportunities to Collaborate

Many grantees shared with NASP that, prior to the grants, many school districts and graduate education programs operated in siloes and missed opportunities to collaborate on filling school-based mental health vacancies. Additionally, while school psychology degree programs have often built partnerships with school districts in the surrounding metropolitan areas, the same partnerships do not exist for school districts farther away from the university, including in rural and other high-needs areas. In turn, this limits opportunities for universities to collaborate with distant school districts and help fill vacant positions. These barriers additionally impact the implementation of grants like MHSP due to the lack of capacity from rural and high-needs school districts to facilitate partnerships.

⁸⁵ N. Skaar (personal communication, October 31, 2024) shared the University of Northern Iowa's experience with the MHSP grant program during a live interview.

State and federal funding to train school-based mental health professionals should include flexible dollars to incentivize the development of new partnerships between universities and school districts across the state. This can be achieved through state professional organization gatherings and other annual meetings between universities and school districts to foster collaboration and learning.

CONCLUSION

The MHSP and SBMH grant programs are driving innovation in communities nationwide and forging a resilient, capable school-based mental health workforce prepared to address child and adolescent mental health needs across the United States. Among the grantees interviewed, the vast majority expressed that they would have been incapable of achieving their respective goals without the support of these grants.

Fully staffed schools improve mental health outcomes for students within their communities, in turn lowering absenteeism and improving students' safety and academic performance. By offering opportunities for schools to innovate and meet capacity, these grants maximize the impact of federal dollars, immediately increase students' access to school mental health services, and reduce long-term federal costs.

Grantees have made strides in addressing staffing shortages; moreover, considering the 3-year average time for a student to become a credentialed school psychologist in a graduate program, NASP expects improvements and successful outcomes to continue to grow at a national level. Policy maker support in the continuation of these programs is a direct investment in the future of America's youth and is critical to addressing the youth mental health epidemic.