

Psychologists in Nova Scotia Schools: a Guide for Parents

Have you met with a psychologist in a school recently? If you are a school teacher, administrator or parent of a child receiving services you have probably attended an assessment feedback or program planning meeting with a psychologist during the school year. While you may never meet the psychologist that serves your local school, for many children and families the school-based psychologist is the first and the only psychologist they will ever meet. If you are the parent of a child waiting for an assessment, support, or intervention services, getting to meet the school's psychologist may be taking longer than you would like.

How Psychologists Fit in the School System

For the Nova Scotia Department of Education, psychologists in the schools are “professional support staff”. That means that psychologists employed by school boards generally serve multiple schools and travel circuits that may cover more than one county. While travel may be reduced in urban areas, school populations tend to be larger and the psychologists may be assigned to seven or more schools. There are approximately 82 psychologists employed across the regional school boards in Nova Scotia. That number is based in part on the Nova Scotia Department of Education's current “core professional service ratio” of 2,500 students to one psychologist.

The Minister's Review of Services for Students with Special Needs recommended a review of that ratio as recently as 2007. The Nova Scotia Department of Education is scheduled to release new guidelines for the delivery of psychological services in schools in the very near future. A psychologist who works in the school system may have been employed in the educational system before they returned to university to become psychologists. Or she or he may have completed their graduate level training and gone directly to work in schools.

Some may have been practicing psychologists who worked in health, mental health, or in private practice prior to being employed by the school system. Regardless of the route they followed, psychologists who work in schools have completed an accredited graduate program, applied for registration with the Nova Scotia Board of Examiners in Psychology, and completed or are completing the requirements to be registered with the Nova Scotia Board of Examiners in Psychology (NSBEP), as a Psychologist in Nova Scotia.

The way psychologists work can vary from school to school or board to board according to policies and practices adopted in each school and/or board. The effect is that what psychologists do in a specific setting appears to be dependent upon what teachers, principals, and school board administrators think psychologists should do as well as how much independence the psychologist has over how s/he does her/his job.

In the public school system, psychologists and the services they deliver are more often managed and/or supervised by staff other than psychologists. (e.g., principals, resource teachers, guidance counselors, speech-language pathologists, etc.) This can pose a number of problems for the practicing school psychologist, one of which is that there may be unnecessary limitations or a lack of knowledge about what they can or cannot do. Psychologists in the schools have a great deal to offer. According to the Canadian Psychological Association:

School psychologists provide a wide variety of both educational and mental health services to districts, school staff, students, and their families.

School Psychologists:

- understand educational policies and issues because they work within the educational system
- understand the viewpoints of the many stakeholders in the educational system because their work requires their regular and direct contact with students, teachers, parents, and the community
- respond over long periods of time to students and situations that are chronic in nature (e.g. disruptive behaviour disorders, learning disabilities) and understand how these problems and situations affect and are affected by the classroom
- bring a scientific, research-based and objective approach to the analysis and assessment of students' learning, behavioural and emotional problems
- have the tools to systematically measure change in behaviour over time
- have the training to carry out psychological assessment of students' cognitive and learning styles for the purpose of educational planning
- have the training to recognize, diagnose, and intervene with various child and adolescent behaviour and learning disorders
- collaborate with students, families, teachers and other health care professionals in formulating appropriate recommendations, plans, and achievable goals for students
- support parents and teachers in the implementation of recommendations and plans
- maintain liaisons with other agencies in the community when appropriate to ensure comprehensive service delivery to students, parents, and the teachers with whom they collaborate
- develop, consult, and participate in programs designed to respond to crises and emergency situations in schools
- stay current with research related to psychology and education, and therefore offer psychological resource and expertise to the educational system in the development of educational policy and procedure as well as program evaluation

What Does the Future Hold?

Historically, psychological services in school have been closely linked to the delivery of educational services for children with special needs. Typically, schools expect psychologists to provide psycho-educational assessment services, often to the exclusion of other services they are both competent and prepared to deliver.

Currently, provincial educators are recognizing the need to integrate education and health care services for children and adolescents. A growing body of research documents the links between good mental health and the ability to learn. There is substantial evidence to support focusing the delivery of psychological services in schools to more comprehensively meet the needs of Nova Scotia's children, youth, and families.

Canadian epidemiology research over the past two decades has consistently shown that approximately 18% to 20% of children will qualify for one or more psychiatric diagnoses during their time in school.

These diagnoses range from learning disabilities and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) to depression and conduct disorder. These are mental health issues with major impacts on a child's or adolescent's behaviour in school and serious impacts on learning. At the same time, learning difficulties can affect a student's social, emotional, and behavioural adjustment, and impact negatively on the child's mental health.

In a primary mental health care model, the school-based psychologist can provide direct provision of first-contact services and a coordination function to ensure continuity and ease of movement when longer term or specialized services are required.

“School psychologists are the most highly trained mental health experts in schools. In addition to knowledge about prevention, intervention, and evaluation

for a number of childhood problems, school psychologists have unique expertise regarding issues of learning and schools. It is [school psychologists'] ethical responsibility to become involved in programs aimed at problems that are broader than assessing and diagnosing what is wrong with a child. As the most experienced school professionals in this area, school psychologists must become invested in addressing social and human ills ... Although [school psychologists] will not 'solve' these ills, [they] must have a role in ameliorating their impact on the lives of children.”

– Sheridan, S. and Gutkin, T. School Psychology Review, v29 n4 p485-502 (2000)

The school-based integrated service model is already exemplified in Nova Scotia by the growing number of Teen Health Centres housed in public schools.

Psychologists in the schools are well placed and well prepared to work collaboratively with health care professionals and a variety of community agencies. Together, they can identify and support students with mental health needs, and develop prevention and early intervention programs.

However, a significant obstacle to developing and enhancing the collaborative integrated model is a matter of numbers. According to the Nova Scotia Department of Education, there are 138,661 students currently enrolled in Nova Scotia Schools. This means that the estimated 18% or about 24,959 students who will need psychological support and/or intervention will likely not be offered these services.

The lack of capacity to meet the psychological needs of children and adolescents in the schools is due in large part to the fact that the 82 psychologists employed by school boards across the province already have a wait list of students for psycho-educational assessment and there is rarely time available for other services.

Psychologists in schools are uniquely positioned to provide primary mental health care. Similar to a primary care model, primary mental health care includes:

- prevention and treatment of common mental health issues

- basic emergency mental health services

- referrals to/coordination with other levels of care (such as hospital and community based mental health services)

- mental health promotion

- healthy child/adolescent development -- school based

- rehabilitation services

- consultation to schools regarding student problems, and

- consultation to schools regarding academic program planning

The Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia (APNS) encourages the Nova Scotia Department of Education to explore and develop innovative, integrated school based service delivery models to promote mental health in the school age population, including but not limited to psycho-educational assessment. As the professional organization representing psychologists in Nova Scotia, APNS wishes to extend an offer of support and collaboration to this end.
