

Report on the Shortage of School Psychologists in Kansas



Kansas Association of School Psychologists

January 2017

www.kasp.org

Introduction

For the last decade it has been known that nearly 50% of school psychologists nationally were expected to leave the field by 2015, with a full two-thirds expected to leave by 2020 (Brock, 2015). Many of these school psychologists entered the field on the tails of P.L. 94-142 in the 1970s and 1980s, and the retirements were predictable. This foreseeable exodus, along with a school culture that was beginning to embrace the comprehensive role school psychologists play in the educational system, was a key reason that school psychologists were identified as one of the most promising career choices in the 2000's and continues to rank at the top of Social Service Jobs according to U.S. News and World Report (School Psychology Overview, 2016).

This outflow of school psychologists, resulting in nation-wide shortages, is occurring at a time when mental health and behavioral needs of students have increased across the country, especially in early childhood and early elementary grades (Kaiser, Cai, Hancock, & Foster, 2002). In 2008, childcare providers reported young children engaging in increasingly severe challenging behaviors at younger ages (Joseph & Strain, 2008). In 2009, approximately 20% of young children in the general population and 70% of young children with special needs engaged in significant challenging behavior (Strain, 2010).

The shortage of school psychologists is felt across the country. In Georgia, large caseloads are making it difficult for school psychologists to complete special education evaluations in a timely manner. School psychologists must prioritize their focus on completing comprehensive educational evaluations, and often must postpone their implementation of necessary therapeutic services that many students require. This unfortunate reality in Georgia will only get more severe, as the number of school psychologists graduating from school psychology training in the state is less than half of the openings across the state (Vignieri, 2016). In Minnesota, districts are asking retired school psychologists to return to the profession, and have increased the number of part-time school psychology positions (although full-time practitioners are being sought), in an effort to ensure vital educational services can be provided as well as possible (Weyhe, 2016).

In Kansas, the shortage of school psychologists has been felt in recent years. Changes in the state employees' retirement system, a challenging educational climate in the state, and increased demand for special education and mental health services in the school system, have caused educators in all positions to retire earlier than expected or to seek employment in other states. This exodus was in addition to those who had already planned to retire in that timeframe, a consideration that further compounds the problem.

The anticipated shortage of school psychologists has been a noted concern of the Kansas Association of School Psychologists (KASP) for some time. In February of 2009, KASP members offered testimony to the House Education Committee of the Kansas legislature, in support of HB2153 which supported NCSP credentialed school psychologist board certification as eligible for the \$1000 annual stipend received by other board-certified educators in Kansas. At the time, the state had been in an 11-year trend in which 2% more people were retiring from the profession than were entering, causing an 11% decrease in the number of school psychologists available per pupil. The situation has only worsened. In 2012, the shortage within the field became a focus of our strategic plan, and it was made an advocacy goal in the Spring of 2016.

Further exploration of this issue was made necessary as KASP fielded multiple requests from school districts and educator unions about the number of school psychologist openings across the state. This information was not readily available to KASP, and a potential resource for statewide education employment (kansasteachingjobs.com) is not always up-to-date, nor is it used by every district across the state. When an inquiry was sent to the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), they reported that they do not keep track of this information.

This report is a response to the need for greater understanding of this issue. The purpose is to provide greater clarity to this concern, so that others will be able to see the scope of the issue and use this information to advocate for solutions to this problem. KASP firmly believes that all students and schools should have access to equitable ratios of school psychologists to meet local needs.

Results

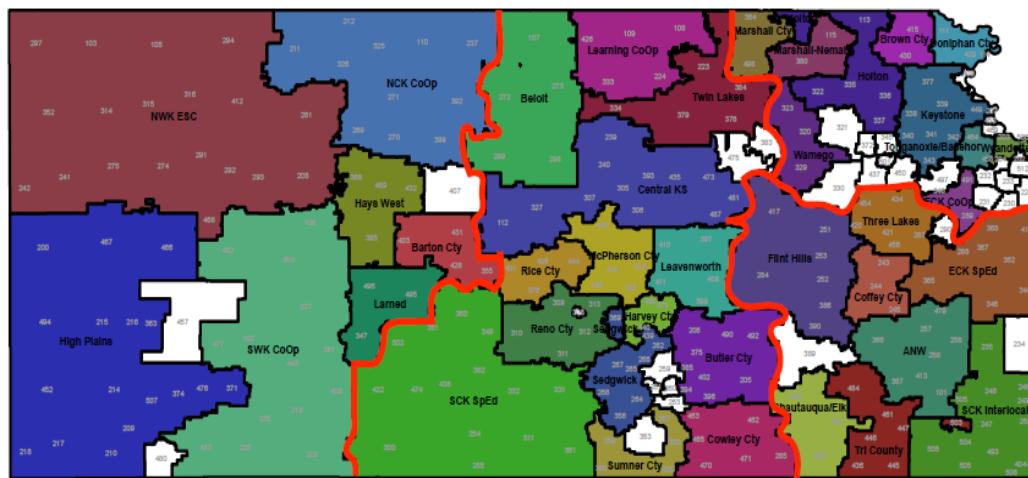
To examine the school psychologist shortage in Kansas further, KASP surveyed employers of school psychologists, Kansas school psychology graduate training programs, and KASP members in order to solicit information about both current and projected school psychology shortages in their schools. Specifically, our surveys sought information related to how many unfilled school psychologist positions there are across the state, how many new school psychologists are being trained in our state universities, and how many current school psychologists plan to leave the field in the next few years.

Current Openings

An email survey was sent to Kansas school districts and special education agencies through a Kansas State Department of Education listserv with an explanation of the purpose of the survey. Some respondents chose to provide anecdotal comments and additional details when submitting their responses. Out of approximately 60 school districts and special education agencies that employ school psychologists, 30 agencies responded to the survey reporting 38.5 full-time equivalent positions that were open in the state of Kansas. Out of the 30 agencies that responded, 19 (63.3%) needed at least a part-time school psychologist to fill their need. Out of these 19 agencies, ten needed two or more school psychologists, eight needed one full time school psychologist, and only one needed a part time school psychologist. Twenty-two of the open positions were in the Central Region, ten were in the Northeast Region, four were in Western Region, and two and one-half positions were in the Southeast Region (See Figure 1 for a map of KASP regions). Table 1 outlines the positions that are open, based on region. Wichita had the highest need out of all the reporting agencies with seven school psychologist openings, and Topeka had the second highest need with four openings. Agencies that chose to provide additional detail to their responses shared that school psychologist positions have become harder to fill recently, and those who were able to fill the position felt very lucky to have done so.

Table 1: Unfilled School Psychologist Positions as of 1st Semester 2016-17 School Year

Region	Number of openings
Central	22
Western	4
Northeast	10
Southeast	2.5
Total	38.5

Figure 1: Map of KASP Regions

School Psychologists in Training

Graduate trainers of school psychologists at the five Kansas universities with school psychology training programs (Fort Hays State University, University of Kansas, Emporia State University, Wichita State University, and Pittsburg State University) were surveyed about the number of students who were anticipated to be ready for their school psychology internship by January 2018 and how many of these students were expected to intern outside of Kansas. In total, the programs expect 36 school psychology interns by January 2018, although seven are planning to leave the state. Details for each university training program can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Anticipated School Psychology Interns by December 2017

University	Total Interns	Plan to Leave KS	Plan to Stay in KS
Fort Hays State University	7	4	3
Pittsburg State University	7	0	7
University of Kansas	5	1	4
Emporia State University	13	2	11
Wichita State University	4	0	4
Total	36	7	29

Future Openings

Members and past-members of the Kansas Association of School Psychologists were surveyed about when they anticipated no longer to be practicing as school psychologists in Kansas. Of the 230 who received the survey, 141 responded. Of the respondents, 15 (10.6%) anticipate the current school year (2016-17) to be their last as a school psychologist in Kansas, with four planning to retire, four planning to work as a school psychologist in another state, three planning to leave the field of school psychology completely, three planning to have another job in K-12 or university education, and one not providing their method of leaving. Another 33 (23.4%) expect to leave school psychology in Kansas in the next two to three years, with twelve planning to retire, sixteen planning to leave the state, two planning to leave the field of school psychology, and three planning to have another job in K-12 or university education (See Table 3).

Table 3: Number Anticipating Leaving the Field of School Psychology in Kansas by Method of Leaving

	Anticipate Leaving After 2016-17 school year	Anticipate leaving after 2017-18 school year or 2018-19 school year	Total Anticipate Leaving by end of 2018-19 school year
Retirement	4	12	16
Leave the field	3	2	5
Career change - Education	3	3	6
Leave the state	4	16	20
No answer	1	0	1
Total Leaving	15 (10.6%)	33 (23.4%)	48 (34.0%)

Note. N = 141.

Of the 48 respondents who plan to leave the field or the state in the next three years, 16 noted high caseloads and/or stressful work conditions contributing to burnout. Nine respondents noted frustration with stagnant or low salaries. Two mentioned concerns about the state pension system (KPERS) and another five stated concerns related to political challenges that negatively impact the Kansas educational climate. Other reasons for anticipated moves were related to family, advancement into education administration, a lack of professional development, and concern about job stability. Not all respondents provided a reason for leaving, and some respondents included more than one reason in their response (See Table 4).

Table 4: Reason for Anticipated Change

Reason	Number of respondents providing reason
Stressful Working Conditions/Caseloads	16
Salary	9
Family	7
KPERS	2
Kansas Politics	5
Move to Education Administration	1
Lack of Job Stability	1
Lack of Professional Development	1

Interpretation

KASP firmly believes that the current and anticipated shortage of school psychologists in Kansas is an issue that requires dire attention and a rapid resolution. 38.5 positions are known to be open in the state, with more openings likely to be open due to many school psychologist employers not responding to the survey. The maximum number of interns that will be ready to be hired by January 2018 is 36, with several of these potential interns already planning to leave the state. Lastly, we know that 48 practicing school psychologists are planning to leave the field or the state by the end of the 2018-19 school year, and this number is likely larger as well, because not all practicing school psychologists responded to the survey (See Table 5).

Table 5: Current Outlook of School Psychologist Shortage in Kansas

Known openings as of Fall 2016	Interns Ready for Hire by Jan 2018	Number of School Psychologists Leaving the Field by End of 2018-19 School Year
38.5	36	48

It is clear that Kansas will not be able to address this gap through in-state training programs alone, as the current graduation/certification rate of school psychologists is not sufficient to fill the available openings, let alone the openings that will be created as more school psychologists leave the field and/or the state.

Recommendations

With a shortage of school psychologists already evident, and a bigger shortage expected in the near future, pragmatic solutions will likely require both recruitment to the field of school psychology, and increased retention efforts to retain school psychology practitioners who are currently working in the field. Many of those leaving are doing so due to other factors that local

and state stakeholders can influence, such as salary, caseloads, and political climate. There are several strategies for recruitment that may be helpful, such as increasing awareness of school psychology careers in high school and undergraduate students, helping others see the positive aspects of the work of school psychologists, and reaching out to teachers or mental health providers who may be interested in becoming school psychologists. However, these recruitment strategies alone will not fully resolve the concern, as the training programs will not be able to develop new interns quickly enough to fill the future vacancies that are anticipated for the field of school psychology in Kansas.

Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Incentivize going into and remaining in school psychology – Provide financial incentives to individuals who choose school psychology as a career, including increased salary, stipends, or student loan forgiveness programs. Give additional incentives to those who go into a position that was not filled the previous year or those who become graduate trainers of school psychologists. Incentives should also be available to those who remain in the field, as a way to encourage those who are near retirement, or are considering leaving for other reasons, to remain in the profession.

Advertise out of state – It is clear we are not going to be able to meet hiring needs quickly with Kansas resources alone. If incentives are strong enough, recruitment from other states becomes a viable option. While other Midwestern states are also dealing with a school psychologist shortage, there are Northeastern states such as New York and Pennsylvania where there is a moderate surplus of school psychologists. Reaching out to these areas may prove fruitful in filling our open positions.

Develop mentorship programs – With many school psychologists reporting stressful working conditions as a reason for leaving, burnout in the field is evident. Mentorships for new and continuing school psychologists can be helpful in reducing work-related stress and keeping more people employed in the field.

Consider working conditions – Districts can improve retention by providing sufficient infrastructure and working conditions for school psychologists, including appropriate assessment materials, office space, clerical support, and technology support (email, computer, printing access, etc.). School psychologists with more positive working environments are more likely to report high levels of job satisfaction and less likely to report burnout.

Conclusion

A shortage of school psychologists is being felt across the nation. In Kansas, there are currently over three dozen positions that are unfilled, and training programs located in Kansas are not going to be able to fill this gap on their own. The gap will also continue to grow, as over 30% of

school psychologists who were surveyed plan to leave the field or the state in the next three years. School districts, special education agencies, and state policymakers will need to develop strategies to retain school psychologists and encourage more people to become school psychologists. This may include the consideration on financial incentives, improved work conditions and workloads, and seeking school psychologists from other states in the short-term.

The role that school psychologists fill is critical to the overall success of Kansas students and schools. It is crucial that solutions to the current shortages be found to ensure that students' academic and social emotional needs are met. KASP remains committed to helping identify a solution to this ever growing problem

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Special recognition to Ashley Enz, Jason Wright, Jessica Mefford, Chris Niileksela, James Persinger, Kathy Gaskey and Kyle Carlin for contributing to this report.
