

## GETTING SCHOOLED

Welcome to Getting Schooled, a regular feature article penned by members of the PAA School Psychology Committee!

As the Alberta government implements an Inclusive Education system, it is important for School Psychologists to teach our education partners about our broad array of skills - **we are more than WISC Jockeys** – as roles and responsibilities change. Alberta Education has put forth an Inclusive Education funding model and for the 2012/13 school year, they have *suggested* allocation guidelines that identify specific professionals (e.g. speech and language, learning coaches). It is concerning that School Psychologists were not identified. We have “a unique opportunity to enhance the role of school psychologists in their support of student success in provincial school systems.” (p. 5, Psychologists’ Association of Alberta, 2010). Dr. Pei and I have developed this article as a means to articulate how School Psychologists can be an invaluable asset in the Alberta Inclusive Education System.

Enjoy the read!

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### School Psychologists – More than WISC Jockeys...

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### Implications of Inclusive Education

Over the past five years, the Alberta government has undertaken a process of restructuring the delivery of special education supports and services. This process was initiated after the dismaying findings from the government’s 2007 audit of severe disabilities files. The audit discovered that 44% of the 16,129 severe disability files did not contain all the required documentation. Furthermore, the government realised that there were wide variations in the interpretation and implementation of special education coding criteria; as a result, the province acknowledged that reform was needed (Alberta Education, n.d.). Consequently, Alberta Education began restructuring their special education framework with *Setting the Direction in Special Education*, a process that evolved into a broader examination of education - *Setting the Direction*, followed by the implementation phase termed *Action on Inclusion* that eventually became *Inclusive Education* – the creation of one inclusive system of education. Early in this process, the Psychologists’ Association of Alberta (PAA) developed the position paper - **The Pivotal Role of Alberta School Psychology Services: A Response to Alberta Education’s *Setting the Direction*** (2010) in which they advocated for a broader role for School Psychologists

in Alberta Schools. Specifically, this paper outlined a role that would enable School Psychologists to provide services congruent with their training in child and adolescent development; principles of learning, behaviour and individual differences; social/emotional/behavioural and academic interventions; as well as assessment and program planning (CPA, 2007). As this Inclusive Education system is implemented, the resulting changes in practice will require “people to think and work differently” (Alberta Education, 2011). This means that School Psychologists will have an opportunity to expand their role and provide comprehensive services to schools. This shift in practice is congruent with school psychology research that has advocated for a reduction in formalized assessment and an increase in the time spent on problem-solving interventions, consultation and research (Harris and Joy, 2010; Hosp and Reschly, 2002).

### **Providing a Broad Spectrum of School Psychology Services**

In their move towards an Inclusive Education system, Alberta Education has eliminated the need for formalized assessments every three years, and has shifted the focus from *assessment for diagnosis* to *assessment for instruction* (Alberta Education, 2012). This should free up the time for School Psychologists to expand their services beyond WISCing and provide students, families and educators with additional meaningful supports.

**What does this look like?** Through the *Guidelines for Professional Practice for School Psychologists* (2007), the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) has described this evolution in school psychology services. The guidelines outline school psychology services across five domains of intervention.

- 1. Student-Focused Direct Intervention** – This is the domain that most School Psychologists have traditionally worked in: formalized individual psycho-educational assessment, curriculum-based measurements, and diagnostic assessment of reading and mathematics skill development, with results informing identification, interventions, and program development. Additionally, student-focused approaches include the provision of individual therapy to students who are having school-related difficulties such as friendships, test anxiety, and bullying, as well as, offering group counselling (relationships, grief and loss, divorce). These targeted supports are often needed in schools and are a valued service that could be provided by School Psychologists.
- 2. Student-Focused Indirect Intervention** – This area of intervention has been identified by teachers and School Psychologists as an important service to expand (Erchul & Sheridan, 2008; Johnson, 2007) and is typically referred to in school psychology literature as *consultation*. Teachers have stated that they require assistance beyond labeling students, and seek support with the planning and implementation of interventions, emphasizing that this support needs to be provided in a collaborative, rather than a directive fashion (Johnson, 2007). Teachers value School Psychologists’ expertise in assessment of students, but recognize that they – as educators – have expertise in classroom interventions and have identified that they should be professional partners with psychologists (Knoetze & Vermoter, 2007). This intervention domain brings School Psychologists into the strategy implementation phase, giving them a role as partners with educators and families to devise academic and behavioural program plans and then to problem-solve during their implementation. There are numerous research-based consultation models that define how to

work with parents and teachers to plan educational and behavioural interventions for individual students (Erchul & Martens, 2010).

3. **School-Wide Intervention** – When School Psychologists become involved in the broader service of the school they are better able to influence the development and implementation of universal strategies and supports (those that benefit all students). This aspect of service has the potential to enable School Psychologists to employ their unique array of skills in terms of preventative interventions, responsive supports, capacity building for teachers and parents, and program development.
  - Preventative Intervention: School Psychologists can proactively influence school environments, thereby preventing the development of more serious problems for some students. This work can be undertaken by collaborating with educators to identify research-based instructional strategies and provide remedial suggestions before students experience significant difficulties.
  - Responsive Supports: School psychologists are the most extensively trained mental health professionals in schools. Therefore, School Psychologists can be an essential support for students and staff following a traumatic event.
  - Capacity Building: With the implementation of an Inclusive Education system, educators will need support to create more inclusive learning environments. School Psychologists can use their expertise in ecological influences and academic engagement to assist teachers in designing classrooms, both physically and instructionally, that engage ALL students in learning. Additionally, there is an opportunity to help educators learn about and effectively utilize universal instructional strategies (e.g., visual schedules) that are essential for the student with a learning disability and also helpful to the student who is sleep-deprived. School psychologists can support the learning of both parents and educators through presentations on a variety of topics ranging from **Parenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to Universal Strategies to Support Students with AD/HD**.
  - Program Development: Over the past fifteen years, Alberta schools have been introduced to *Positive Behaviour Supports* programming with variable success. School psychologists can utilize their expertise in social/emotional/behavioural development to assist with this program's implementation fidelity and the selection of targeted and specialized intervention supports. With the introduction of an Alberta model of Response-to-Intervention, schools will need to devise and implement school-wide screening and assessment programs. Considering their extensive background in assessment, School Psychologists can provide guidance in developing and/or selecting valid and time-efficient assessment tools.
4. **District/System-Wide Intervention** – As an Inclusive Education system is being implemented, school districts will need to undertake a transformation in how to provide an engaging education to ALL students. School psychologists possess skills that enable them to provide services to the entire district through designing and implementing district-wide training programs (e.g. behaviour management, level A assessment), district screening programs (e.g. kindergarten entrance), and developing and implementing district intervention programs (e.g. social skills). As programs are implemented, School Psychologists can make use of their program evaluation knowledge by assisting with data collection to evaluate the effectiveness of system-wide interventions. As well, it is important to recognize that School Psychologists have a broad array of skills that prepare them to work collaboratively with

other professionals as they advocate for the needs of students and it may therefore be advantageous for them to participate on multi-agency committees as wrap around services are implemented.

- 5. Research** – In education, there is an expectation that teachers are engaging in action research and utilizing research strategies to demonstrate the effectiveness of educational strategies. As well, school districts cycle through *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)* projects every three years. These research projects are designed by school districts to encourage and promote creativity and innovation that result in improved student learning. School psychologists can support school districts by sharing their understanding of various research designs and statistics to assist in the planning and conducting of investigations to improve student success.

### **Professional Responsibilities**

“School psychologists have an “ethical responsibility to become involved in programs aimed at problems . . . broader than assessing and diagnosing what is wrong with a child.” (p. 488, Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). With the implementation of an Inclusive Education system in Alberta, School Psychologist can fulfill the role that they have been trained for as articulated by the Canadian Psychological Association. There is a potential for School Psychologists to contribute in a broader way to the well-being of all Alberta students, and as such, School Psychologists are implored to embrace this professional responsibility through the provision of a full spectrum of school psychology services.

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