

## Position Paper

---

### **The Pivotal Role of Alberta School Psychology Services: A Response to Alberta Education's *Setting the Direction***

#### **Statement of Values**

The Mission of the Psychologists' Association of Alberta (PAA) is to advance the science-based profession of psychology and to promote the well-being and potential of all Albertans. Hence, the PAA endorses measures designed to promote the learning, mental health, and educational interests of all of Alberta's children. Additionally, the PAA regards the work of psychologists in schools as vital to supporting effective academic, social and emotional development for all children.

The PAA feels that the values and objectives of school psychologists in Alberta closely align with the stated purpose and goals of *Setting the Direction*, and supports the efforts of Alberta Education to develop an equitable, inclusive system for all students. Because of their training and expertise, school psychologists must be instrumental in the development and implementation of such a system.

This time of transition and change is an opportunity for school psychologists to more effectively use their skills both in schools and in the broader, school-family-community network. The *Setting the Direction* initiative provides a framework for families, educators and school psychologists to collaborate more closely in supporting the learning and social/emotional development of students.

The PAA recognizes that professional psychological services may be provided to schools, family and community in numerous and varied forms; however, this position paper will restrict its focus to articulating the specific role of school psychologists.

#### **What is *Setting the Direction*?**

The PAA interprets Alberta Education's *Setting the Direction* as a framework designed to support a diverse range of student needs through one inclusive educational system which is appropriately resourced, highly accountable, and provides equitable opportunities for all students. The components of particular relevance to the role of school psychologists include:

- promoting collaboration through development of school-based expertise, increasing the involvement of families, enhancing access to technology, and ensuring functionality of a seamless wraparound service approach.
- using system indicators to determine success, support continuous program development, and provide equitable opportunities for all students.

- moving away from funding based on the identification of students with special needs through a coding system to a funding model based on geographic and demographic data, as well as resource guidelines.

## **Who are School Psychologists?**

The College of Alberta Psychologists (CAP, n.d.) identifies seven branches of Psychology: Educational/School, Clinical/Counselling, Forensic, Neuropsychology, Health, Rehabilitation and Industrial/Organizational. Psychologists in Alberta identify areas of practice within the seven branches during the registration process and effective January 2011, will annually review and update their professional skills through a continuing competency program. The CAP (n.d.) defines Educational/School psychology as “the application of psychological knowledge, skills and judgment about human behaviour and development to the understanding of the social, emotional and learning needs of children, adolescents and adults, and to the creation of learning environments that facilitate learning and mental health.” (p. 2) More specifically, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) defines school psychologists as being registered professionals with unique expertise in student learning, child development, behaviour problems, school curriculum and school culture (n.d.). The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA, 2002a, 2002b, 2007) describes school psychologists as science-practitioners who possess skills and knowledge in the areas of child and adolescent development, principles of learning and behaviour and individual differences, social/emotional/behavioural and academic interventions, assessment and program planning.

This breadth of practice speaks to the diversity of skills that school psychologists bring to the educational system. School Psychologists have the expertise to work closely with teachers, school administrators, parents and students alike to improve a child’s functioning in the school, home and community. Therefore, school psychologists are in a unique position to provide valuable support and guidance specifically related to the recommendations provided by *Setting the Direction*.

## **Recent Roles of School Psychologists in Alberta**

In the early 1990s, Alberta Education designed a special education accountability system that required school divisions to repeatedly assess and “code” children according to pre-defined diagnostic categories in order to qualify for provincial funding. Consequently, the role of psychologists in Alberta school districts became increasingly limited to assessing children and providing diagnoses. Unfortunately, this externally-imposed emphasis on diagnosis to access or maintain funding, often resulted in a system in which the number of psychological reports completed in the most economical and timely manner was a paramount requirement. In some cases, reports became compliance documents rather than the basis for programming plans.

It is of additional concern that Alberta Education’s coding criteria were often not consistent with accepted psychological diagnostic criteria (e.g., DSM IV-TR). Psychologists were also faced with situations where there was little relationship between the code, and the actual educational, behavioural and/or social/emotional needs of the child. Alberta psychologists have expressed concern that school districts’ search for a code rather than the development of programming strategies has limited their practice (Johnson, 2007). Furthermore, the CPA (2002b) has identified a dominant focus on assessment tasks as a barrier to utilizing the breadth of expertise a school psychologist has to offer students, families and educators.

## The Case for Change

School psychology literature has examined the nature of school psychology practice over the past 25 years (Harris and Joy, 2010; Jordan, Hindes and Saklofske, 2009; Reschley, 2000; Saklofske et al., 2007). Research has consistently demonstrated that school psychologists spend the majority of their time in assessment activities, despite their ongoing expression of a desire to spend less time in assessment and more time in direct intervention, consultation and research (Harris and Joy, 2010; Hosp and Reschly, 2002; Janzen and Carter, 2001; Jordan, et al., 2009; Saklofske et al., 2007). As well, there has been repeated identification of a need for comprehensive and integrated school psychological services (Johnson, 2007; Reschly, 2000) that include assessment as only one component of a spectrum of tasks.

Alberta-based school psychology literature has identified the need to change school psychology services:

- Ferstay-Bianchini's (1988) research in a large urban Alberta city found that although teachers' *primary* use of psychological services was for formal assessment, they reported that the most *valuable* service was consultation. Furthermore, teachers advocated for an increase in a school psychologist's time being spent in program planning, consulting, counselling and inservicing.
- Janzen and Carter (2001) commented on the role of the psychologist as a "gatekeeper," with diagnosis seen as essential for program funding. They stated that, with the increasing requirement for documentation, school psychologists have less time for providing other services. They also noted that there is an increasing trend towards psychological services being provided on a contract basis by psychologists whose primary interest and expertise is not in school psychology.
- Mah and Crawford (2004) raised concerns regarding the public's understanding of the role of school psychologists. They articulated that although their function in school districts was primarily that of assessment, they were often able to be just as helpful in responding to teachers referral needs in a consultative role.
- Johnson (2007) reported that Alberta teachers and school psychologists both felt that school psychological services would be more effective when teachers, parents and school psychologists worked as a team to develop an understanding of a student's learning profile, and then collaboratively devise a programming plan.

It is important to remember that the key to the effectiveness of psychologists working with children in schools is the existence of a match between the expertise and training of the psychologist and the role description and expectations of the educational system (Johnson, 2007; Mah and Crawford, 2004).

A potential format for the structure and function of school psychology services has been defined by the Guidelines for Professional Practice for School Psychologists adopted by the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA, 2007). As a professional practice document for school psychologists across Canada, it identifies five levels of intervention:

- Student-Focused Indirect Intervention - consultation with parents and teachers in planning educational and behavioural interventions for individual students

- Student-Focused Direct Intervention - individual psychological assessment, individual counselling and therapy, and group skills development
- School-Wide Intervention - liaison with school learning teams, collaboration with school staff to support inclusive environments, in-service education to school staff and parents, prevention and intervention programs for a positive school environment, consultation with school personnel on universal interventions that assist all students, providing updates on current research and resulting best practices, planning and implementing school-wide screening and assessment programs, providing information on best practices in children's mental health, debriefing and defusing students and staff following a traumatic event
- District/System-Wide Intervention - providing district-wide in-service training (e.g. behaviour management, assessment), designing and implementing district screening programs, developing and implementing district intervention programs (e.g. social skills), assisting with data collection and evaluation of system-wide interventions, advocating for exceptional children and participating in multi-agency collaboration
- Research - designing and implementing research projects for a variety of purposes.

School psychologists have long advocated an increased breadth of their role in the support of students and teachers; *Setting the Direction* provides a hopeful framework to realise those aspirations.

### **Alignment with *Setting the Direction***

The PAA maintains that a comprehensive school psychology services model is integral to the successful implementation of *Setting the Direction*. School psychologists can specifically support the recommendations of this initiative in terms of:

1. Programming
  - working with parents and teachers to determine students' needs and effective interventions
  - providing evidence-based, best practice professional development to educators and parents
  - working closely with school staff to develop school-based expertise
  - helping schools to develop and maintain practices and environments that support inclusive education
  - participating as key members of specialized supports and services
  - developing and implementing screening instruments and processes for young children
  - evaluating the effectiveness of assistive technology
2. Accountability
  - helping to design and monitor system indicators that reflect program goals and promote comparable learning opportunities
  - providing expertise in the design of evaluation systems that support continuous program improvement

### 3. Funding and Support

- assisting in the interpretation of geographic, demographic and resource guideline data used in resource allocation.

### **PAA's Recommendations**

The PAA advocates for the implementation of integrative and comprehensive school psychology services that provide support for all students, their families, and school staff, and endorses a service model that simultaneously reflects the CPA intervention levels outlined above and emphasizes:

1. collaborative teams with sufficient allocation of time for school psychologists, school staff, parents and key partners to work together in an ongoing manner to determine learning profiles, find effective solutions to learning and behavioural challenges and develop programming that focuses on strengths to facilitate growth.
2. a shift from assessment and diagnosis for funding to assessment of learning strengths and needs. School psychologists value formal assessment processes and are uniquely qualified to provide this service. However, formal assessment is only one component of a continuum of school psychology services. In addition, assessment expectations should shift towards the evaluation of children's abilities to inform classroom practice.
3. building the capacity of students, parents, and school staff, by focusing on strengths while providing consultation and education regarding recent research and best practices in learning, behaviour and development.

### **Conclusion**

The Psychologists' Association of Alberta believes that Alberta Education's *Setting the Direction* provides a unique opportunity to enhance the role of school psychologists in their support of student success in provincial school systems. School psychologists are also in a position to contribute positively and comprehensively to the redesign of student support systems in Alberta schools. The PAA recognizes that a shift away from an assessment-for-funding model to a comprehensive school psychology service model may have implications for the professional learning of practicing psychologists and for university training programs. The PAA welcomes the opportunities that these changes create for re-defining our professional role. The present political, social and professional climate offers an opportunity for school psychologists to collaborate in the development of both preventive and responsive student services, thereby enhancing the quality of education for all Albertans. The PAA looks forward to working with government and key stakeholders in the implementation of *Setting the Direction*.

## References

- Canadian Psychological Association. (2007). *Professional practice guidelines for school psychologists in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.cpa.ca/cpsite/userfiles/Documents/publications/CPA%20Guideline%20Practice.pdf>
- Canadian Psychological Association. (2002a). *Enhancing the experience of children and youth in today's schools: The role of psychology in Canadian schools - The contribution of the school psychologist*. Retrieved from [http://www.cpa.ca/documents/School\\_1.pdf](http://www.cpa.ca/documents/School_1.pdf)
- Canadian Psychological Association. (2002b). *Enhancing the experience of children and youth in today's schools: The role of psychology in Canadian schools – A position paper*. Retrieved from [http://www.cpa.ca/documents/School\\_2.pdf](http://www.cpa.ca/documents/School_2.pdf)
- College of Alberta Psychologists. (n.d.). *Supervision plan*. Retrieved from <http://www.cap.ab.ca/pdfs/HPASupervisionPlan.pdf>
- Ferstay-Bianchini, C. R. (1988). *Teacher perceptions of the role of the school psychologist*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
- Hosp, J. L., & Reschly, D. J. (2002). Regional differences in school psychology practice. *School Psychology Review*, 31, 11–29.
- Janzen, H. L., & Carter, S. (2001). State of the art of school psychology in Alberta. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 16, 79-84.
- Johnson, R. C. (2007). *Attributes of effective psycho-educational assessment: Teachers' and school psychologists' perceptions*. Available from UMI Dissertation Express. (AAT NR32987)
- Jordan, J. J., Hindes, Y. L., & Saklofske, D. H. (2009). School psychology in Canada: A survey of roles and functions, challenges and aspirations. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 24, 245-264.
- Mah, J. & Crawford, S. (December 2004). Raising the Profile of School Psychologists. *Symposium*, 14(3), 4-6.
- National Association of School Psychologists (n.d.). *What is a school psychologist?* Retrieved from [http://www.nasponline.org/about\\_sp/whatis.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/about_sp/whatis.aspx)
- Reschly, D. J. (2000). The present and future status of school psychology in the United States. *School Psychology Review*, 29, 507–522.
- Saklofske, D. H., Schwan, V. L., Bartell, R., Mureika, J. M. K., Andrews, J., Derevensky, J., et al. (2007). School psychology in Canada: Past, present and future perspectives. In T. K. Fagan & P. S. Wise (Eds.), *School psychology: Past, present and future* (pp. 297-338). Bethesda, MD: NASP.

\*Adopted by the PAA Board of Directors – November 27, 2010