

Advocating for better access to assessments, psychological services, and prevention services for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens

Background and Concerns

The Ministry of Education is to be applauded for investing in the mental health of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens: however, improvements can always be made and, in the case of today's youth, the future depends on getting it right. The educational system still requires the following system improvements:

- Better access to assessments and psychological services — long waiting lists for psychological assessments in schools and especially the provision of psychological services to students with complex mental health needs.
- Better access to primary and secondary prevention services to build resiliency and address emerging academic and mental health problems through screening and early identification before problems become complex.

To address these unmet needs, the Ministry of Education should mandate that each school board hire Psychologists* and graduate training positions should be increased to ensure that Ontario has an adequate supply of School Psychologists.

Role of Psychology in Education

Psychologists in schools provide early intervention

- Children with mental health needs are often initially identified and receive intervention at school.
- Psychologists are well trained to carry out developmental assessments of young children, as well as to implement primary and secondary prevention programs to address early issues in mental health and learning difficulties.

More Psychologists in the school system are needed to address the assessment wait list

- Psychologists, who have the most training in mental health intervention and prevention, need to be available for counseling students with mental health needs, as well as to design and implement prevention programs.
- In many boards, there is a blanket requirement for psychological assessments in order to access special education support, which limits access to other types of psychological services. If boards would provide special education support without this blanket requirement, and would request psychological assessments only when necessary and appropriate, access to psychological services (including consultation, assessment, prevention/intervention, counseling) would improve.

- School board Psychologists are being asked to provide assessments to access services outside of the school system that are the responsibility of other Ministries, thus further inflating wait lists, particularly assessments to access accommodations in post-secondary institutions (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities) and accessing services for adult supports through Developmental Services Ontario (Ministry of Community and Social Services). Referrals to and funding envelopes for assessments to community-based Psychologists would increase access to necessary services.

School Psychologists understand the culture, goals and needs of school communities

- They are able to tailor their services to the needs of each child in their assigned school, with an understanding of that particular school's culture and climate.
- They help teachers understand students' learning profiles and mental health needs. School Psychologists provide the core to understanding students' social, educational, emotional, self-regulation and academic skills.
- Many families cannot afford to access private assessments or psychological services for mental health issues — it is an equity and social justice issue that would be addressed with sufficient access to School Psychologists.
- Providing funding for community-based Psychologists and Neuropsychologists to fill the gap that exists for non-school related assessment services (i.e. post-secondary and adult developmental supports) would allow school Psychologists to focus on school related needs, thus relieving waiting lists for school-based services, and would ensure timely assessment, diagnosis and treatment recommendations.

Key Points & Challenges to Consider

- Psychologists in school boards have the highest level of training in both mental health interventions as well as psychological assessment and diagnosis for children and youth. Psychological assessments are necessary when understanding the learning and social-emotional profile of the child/youth is critical for providing appropriate intervention. However, the high demand for assessments may leave limited time available to address the mental health needs of students, either in terms of direct counseling or in terms of prevention work.
- The increasing complexity of cases and mental health needs of students means the number of Psychologists in the system needs to be increased.
- Not all school boards in Ontario employ Psychologists. Some boards contract with psychologists to provide assessments to access special education; however, these “one-off” assessments do not include consultative and mental health services, as well as knowledge of school cultures and climates, so that assessments can be personalized for schools and their staff. As well, these “one-off” assessments do not provide for psychological follow up of findings, in terms working with the teacher to implement recommendations or participation in the development of Individual Education Plan.
- School boards differ in terms of the ratio of Psychologists to students.
- Like teachers and administrators, Psychologists also need to be mandated within the school boards.

OPA Recommendations to Ontario’s Government

Advocate for mandating School Psychologists who understand school context, climate and school/board strategic goals at a higher ratio to:

- address the mental health needs of students;
- provide developmental screening and prevention programs for early intervention to address emerging academic and emotional/self-regulation issues and prevent future serious mental health issues;
- provide services to address the increasing demands for supporting transitions;
- ensure psychologists support program development for students, especially those students with academic difficulties; and,
- more Clinical and School Psychology training programs are required at universities; and school boards and other community agencies (including hospitals and other health care centres) should develop pre-doctoral internship training positions to accommodate the training needs of an increased psychology workforce.

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*The term “Psychologist” in this document refers both to doctoral-level Psychologists and masters-level

“Psychological Associates”. For information on the extensive training required to become a registered Psychologist or Psychological Associate, please see: www.cpo.on.ca

Resources

- Canadian Psychological Association research/consultation paper states that providing timely access to school psychology services maximizes student potential.
- Research (Massey et al., 2005; Crisp et al., 2006) shows that school-employed support services (e.g., School Psychologists) are the best professionals to provide mental health services in schools as they are better connected with both the students and the staff. Research showed the advantage of school board-employed professionals, including Psychologists, compared to community agency mental health workers in providing mental health prevention and intervention services to students.

Utilizing school board-employed Psychologists resulted in better interventions than utilizing community workers:

- better accessibility and acceptance of the interventions
- less teacher resistance
- better sustainability of programs.

- Ratios of psychology staff to students: Association of Chief Psychologists with Ontario School Boards survey indicated that the ratio of psychology staff in Ontario school boards was as high as 1 for every 8,000 students; average was well over 1:3500. The best ratio to reduce wait lists and provide mental health services for students is 1:1000. When school psychology services are provided at an optimum ratio, they can provide comprehensive services that are cost-effective, particularly with respect to prevention. The ratio of psychologists to students recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists in US is 1 to 500-700. Saklofske et al. recommended one school psychologist to 1000 students in a 2007 study (OPA Professional Practice Guidelines for School Psychologists in Ontario).

References

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