

## **WHAT ABOUT ME? SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS AND THE LEAST OF THESE**

More than ever before, virtually every industry seems to wrestle with the realities of a four-letter word. This word, data, has far-reaching implications that extend beyond its simple configuration of consonants and vowels. But instead of being feared or avoided, data should be welcomed, appreciated, and even sought after. Although school psychologists have heard numerous presentations about the importance of data-based decision-making and regularly read about the role of data to effectively serve children, families, and communities, especially in an increasingly diverse and multicultural 21<sup>st</sup> century society, it is worth noting that data is simply information that must be understood within a broader context. Whether monitoring a student's reading progress using curriculum based assessments or time spent on-task using a simple, yet clever, behavior plan that is coupled with the perfect reinforcer, data is not only useful, but essential information to be shared with various audiences and stakeholder groups.

In the spirit of School Psychology Awareness Week, I encourage you to consider how school psychologists strive, grow, and thrive by being mindful of the contextual influences that impact data that are shared to, and received from others as we endeavor to engage all students to successfully meet challenges, develop skills, and become thriving members of their school communities. Specifically, what are school psychologists striving towards? How do school psychologists grow? And, when do school psychologists thrive?

Albeit subtle, various education groups are competitive with their counterparts; and nationally, the United States of America is vested in its international ranking in relation to other developed countries. For example, from Connecticut to California, and Mississippi to Maine, public and private institutions commonly report high school graduation rates. One public school division in Virginia reported the following about the Class of 2013: [School Division] had an on-time graduation rate of 97.5 percent, which was 7.1 percent above the state average. Referring to the Class of 2014, the same jurisdiction boasted that 62.72 percent of its graduates would be attending a 4-year college or university and 26.96 percent would be attending a 2-year school. While these are impressive statistics that might allow the district bragging rights amongst its peers, unfortunately these data can overlook the least of these whom are always present in every American public school system. Said another way, the broader context that must be understood is an appreciation of the 2.5 percent who did not graduate on time in 2013, and the 8.34 percent who would not be attending 2- or 4-year colleges or universities (1.98 percent planned to enroll in a branch of the armed services). Of the 4,540 graduates who comprised the Class of 2014, 378 young people—the least of these—would not be continuing their education. Through a national lens, data released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation for the 2011-2012 school year showed that 81 percent of high school students earned a diploma within four years. Conversely, 19 percent—the least of these—did not.

### **SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS STRIVE: THEY ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, BEHAVIORAL, AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF ALL STUDENTS**

As the vast majority of school psychologists are employed in public school settings, their work is focused on the success of all students. By building collaborative relationships with parents and teachers to prevent and address a variety of academic, social, emotional, and behavioral challenges,

school psychologists possess a unique set of skills to support the healthy development of children and adolescents. Although data provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation showed that 77 percent of children were not living in poverty in 2012, the broader context is that 23 percent or 16,397,000 children were living in this unfortunate reality. As public servants, the least of these—more than 16 million children—are the concern of school psychologists. Especially knowing that the numerous and significant challenges faced by children and families living in poverty have an increasingly negative impact on virtually every educational outcome, the school psychologist as advocate strives for those without a voice of their own and those who are unsure of how to use their voice for their benefit.

**SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS GROW:  
THEY RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR CONTINUAL PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT**

Published in August 2014, a Washington Post article reported that ethnic and racial minorities were projected to be, for the first time in the nation's history, the majority of students attending public schools. Referring to data released from the United States Department of Education, by 2022, minority groups will constitute 54.7 percent of the public school student population. Why are such data important? What do these data mean for school psychologists?

It is incumbent upon school psychologists working in increasingly diverse environments and with increasingly diverse clients to continually develop the necessary cultural competencies to effectively serve children, families, schools, and communities. Such growth is not only necessary and professional, but also personal and begins with self-reflection and an honest appraisal of one's own comforts and personal biases followed by a commitment to continual growth each day. In the same manner that educators expect students to demonstrate growth over time, school psychologists who are stunted and stagnant in this important area of professional life are essentially regressing.

Moreover, school psychologists help their colleagues appreciate the dynamic interaction of race with other variables (e.g., poverty) and its impact on school performance. Specifically, given the history of disproportionate identification and placement of minority students with disabilities in more restrictive special educational settings, as these children are increasingly becoming the majority in American schools, school psychologists are poised to be advocates for the implementation of universal preventive methods and multi-modal and multi-informant non-discriminatory assessment policies and practices to more accurately measure children's abilities.

**SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS THRIVE:  
WHEN NO CHILD IS LOST OR LEFT BEHIND**

The Elementary and Second Education Act (ESEA), which in recent years has been more commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was first signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson to promote "full educational opportunity." By offering grants to school divisions that served low-income students, scholarships for low-income college students, and federal aid to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education for all students, most would agree with the philosophical and moral underpinnings of such legislation. In fact, it is likened unto an ancient parable that talks about searching for one lost sheep although the owner still had 99 remaining. School psychologists who are concerned about the welfare of all children—especially the least of these—thrive when not one is lost or left behind.

Arguably one of the most famous uses of a triangle, Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is founded upon meeting the most basic of human needs as the foundation for living a full, complete, and productive life. For all people, and especially children, the basic human needs to be provided for; safe and protected; and loved, valued, and cared for as part of a community are central to healthy development. When these ideals are demonstrated in meaningful ways, the following messages are communicated: "I believe in you. I support you. You can accomplish your goals. You will succeed in life."

When all children, especially the least of these, consistently receive these messages, then, and only then, will we be able to say that school psychologists and the practice of school psychology are thriving.