

# CE Corner

## Building a Career in School Consulting

BY STEPHANIE PAPPAS

**A** COUPLE YEARS AGO, a high school in Washington State called Andrew Jordan Thayer, PhD, a licensed psychologist who specializes in pediatric and school psychology, with a problem. Attendance at the school was dismal, and staff were struggling to reverse chronic absenteeism. Thayer and his colleagues at Continua Consulting Group agreed to help. He launched an assessment of the school's culture, finding that the underlying problem was that many students felt disconnected from and uncared for by the school's adults.

Pulling from practices known to work at other schools, Thayer collaborated with teachers to set up a new welcome spot at the school where kids would be greeted by name at arrival. Teachers also started greeting kids at the beginning of class at classroom doors. After a year of tweaking and adding additional support such as teacher mentors for struggling students, the school was a brighter, happier place, as evidenced by a return to average attendance numbers.

Thayer's intervention is an example of how consulting psychologists can bring additional expertise to schools: Schools need mental health support, and psychologists need reliable ways to access and assist the student population. School consulting is an emerging—and rapidly evolving—pathway to meet both needs.

Only 52% of public schools report that they have the resources to provide mental health services to all the kids who need them, with 51% complaining of insufficient mental health staff, 52% citing inadequate funding, and 47% reporting inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals (School Pulse Panel, National Center for Education

Statistics, March 2025). Meanwhile, research shows that about a fifth of school-age kids have a mental, emotional, or behavioral condition, and 54% of those struggled to get mental health care (Leburn-Harris, L. A., et al., *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, Vol. 46, No. 6, 2025).

Schools are where kids spend a big chunk of their time, and teachers are among the first adults who notice when kids are struggling, said Nicole Barnes, PhD, executive lead psychologist for education at APA. Meeting them at school “makes really good sense,” Barnes said.

Among schools' biggest needs are behavioral assessments, autism evaluations, behavioral consultation, support for neurodivergent learners, treatment for mood disorders, trauma-informed practices, psychology-informed consulting on systems-level practices and structures, bilingual practitioners, professional development, and sometimes even parent counseling. (Under New York state law, for example, districts are required to counsel and train parents of kids with autism to perform follow-up intervention activities in the home.)

There are numerous ways schools integrate mental health support, including individual school psychologists who cover one to multiple schools, district-level psychologists supervising school counselors, and contracts with community behavioral health organizations. In the latter case, psychologists employed by a private clinic might spend time working with patients at schools. Some districts are expanding school-based health services—even hosting full-service clinics in some cases to provide mental health services along with basic medical care such as vaccinations, child well-check

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#### Learning objectives

After reading this article, CE candidates will be able to:

- 1** Describe the needs that schools have and some of the areas of expertise that psychologists can bring into school systems.
- 2** Explain some of the barriers and challenges to setting up an independent consulting business.
- 3** Discuss approaches that can set up psychologists and schools for the most productive collaborations.

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## KEY POINTS

### 1

About half of U.S. schools report difficulties meeting their students' mental health needs. Of the schools who cite this struggle, about half report lack of access to professional mental health staff.

### 2

Psychologists have areas of expertise that can help schools and districts improve student and staff well-being.

### 3

While there is no single path into a career in independent school consulting, networking and understanding how one's own skills match what a school system needs are key aspects of success.

appointments, and dental visits—and therefore need mental health professionals who specialize in school, pediatric, or adolescent psychology.

Some psychologists are also finding that they can easily fill their patient roster by consulting with schools independently. Opportunities for building that type of independent consulting practice vary by state.

Evidence suggests that psychological consulting for schools can have a lasting impact. One model, called conjoint behavioral consultation (CBC), brings together a consultant with parents and teachers to solve problems around children's needs in an 8- to 12-week intervention. As part of a larger intervention for kids with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), CBC has been shown to improve parent involvement

in education, reduce parent reports of negative or ineffective discipline, and improve homework performance (Power, T. J., et al., *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 80, No. 4, 2012).

These effects persisted for at least 3 months after the brief intervention. A randomized controlled trial of 267 kindergarten through third graders at 45 rural schools in the Midwest found that CBC reduced off-task and disruptive behavior in classrooms and improved parent-teacher relationships (Sheridan, S. M., et al., *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 61, 2017). A year later, parents reported that their children had maintained the adaptive and social skills they had improved during the intervention, and the kids' new teachers confirmed that the children continued to show a reduced rate of school problems (Sheridan, S. M., et al., *School Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2019).

### Making it work

There are no preordained paths into independent consulting roles with schools, so psychologists' entries into this career path tend toward the idiosyncratic. Juliana Ramirez, EdS, who provides bilingual evaluation services to school districts throughout Ohio, worked as a school psychologist in a public school for 8 years before making the leap to independent practice. It started with occasional work with a district that contracted Ramirez to look at Spanish-language evaluations coming in with students moving from Puerto Rico, then grew when a school counselor friend asked if she could help conduct assessments with Spanish-speaking students. From there, Ramirez started pitching her skills and services to new districts on her own. "It honestly was a very wild idea," she said.

But it worked. In 2023, she started a webinar-based course called LEAP to Liberty that helps other school psychologists at various degree and licensure levels make a similar transition to independent contract work. She now offers workshops on how to set fees, handle 1099 contract work, and deal with the business side of this type of career path. Often, she said, a wise choice is to find a specialized niche. For her, that is bilingual assessments, but some psychology colleagues have zeroed in on offering only preschool-age assessments or simply covering parental leaves for district-employed school psychologists.

Networking is key for many psychologists who have made it work. Thayer, in Washington State, got his graduate degree under an adviser who did school psychology consulting and has leveraged the connections he gleaned from working with that adviser into a career of his own. Atlanta school psychologist Brandi Tanner, PhD, has taken multiple roles in private practice, from conducting psychological evaluations for students to running professional development trainings on how school staff and mental health staff can improve their communication. She launched her practice with contract testing work found on a psychology job board, she said, but from there it took off with word-of-mouth referrals.

While larger urban districts often have their own staff and specific procedures for outside consultants, charter school networks and rural districts often lack their own dedicated psychologists and may need services. Psychologists can look for state funding opportunities or seek out requests for proposals by nonprofits to launch their own small-scale projects, which can open up new collaborations within schools. A community



School consulting is an emerging pathway for psychologists to meet the growing mental health needs of students.

provider who sees kids from several different schools might reach out to those schools and offer a pro bono training to get a foot in the door, suggested Aaron Fischer, PhD, a professor of school psychology at the University of Utah. “When you offer those services and they know you’re available, then they may want your help for a lot of different things,” Fischer said.

Many school consultants also fold teleconsulting into their portfolio, enabling them to expand their geographic reach. Teleconsulting is especially helpful for reaching rural districts with the highest needs, said Ramirez, who is able to serve districts

across Ohio by incorporating virtual assessments.

Start by evaluating your own skill set, Tanner advises. The best results in a consulting relationship occur when a provider has the right skills to solve a problem that a school or district is experiencing. Every school district is different, and even individual schools have their own cultures and procedures. From the outside, policies might appear perplexing, but there is usually a reason behind why things are set up the way they are, Thayer said. Schools may be juggling short-term funding streams, for example, or have to meet different requirements for

documentation at district, state, and federal levels. There may be local policies or community norms that differ from school to school.

“I encourage everyone to be curious about schools and how they function,” he said. “Then figure out how your skills and expertise fit into that system.”

### **Adding expertise, not workload**

Because no two schools or districts function in the same way or have the same problems, attending school board meetings, reading local news, and talking to teachers can all be ways to learn about what is happening

within a particular district and what problems a psychologist could solve. As with any consulting relationship, it is important to come in with a humble, open-minded approach and ask what the school needs from you, Fischer said.

It is also very important to realize that teachers are not clinicians, and they should not have to be, said Andrea McDonald, APA's director of child and adolescent learning and well-being. "Collaboration between psychologists and teachers prevents us from asking schools to become experts in something else for which they don't have the capacity or adequate training," McDonald said, "and creates an exchange of information and expertise that benefits the child."

In other words, a teacher is not being asked to treat a student's mental health needs; instead, a trained psychologist helps the teacher recognize behaviors that might signal the need for further, more intensive support for a kid. And getting that support can, in the long run, reduce the time a teacher spends on classroom disruptions and increase the likelihood of success for the student.

"What we hear from teachers is, when they get good support, they do find that it's easier to do their job," said Brandon Stratford, PhD, a public health research scientist at the research organization Child Trends. "It's a good return on investment for them."

Collaboration is crucial, said David Meichenbaum, PhD, director of the community consulting and clinical services program at The Summit Center, a major provider of services for individuals with developmental, social, and behavioral disorders in Getzville, New York. When he generates a report for a school client, he does not finalize his recommendations until he meets

Trained psychologists can help teachers learn how to spot students who may need further, more intensive support, which can reduce classroom disruptions and increase the likelihood of success for the student in the long run.



with the school team to make sure his ideas will be feasible. “The best plan is the one that is going to be implemented,” Meichenbaum said.

Some of this involves trial and error. Ramirez, at the beginning of her solo career, started pitching special education directors, offering her bilingual evaluation services. In time, she realized those people were not the ones who needed her; her real target audience was the monolingual school psychologist who needed help determining if a Spanish-speaking child’s academic struggles were because of a language barrier or a disability.

Meichenbaum, who frames his consulting work as helping kids overcome deficits in skill acquisition, skill fluency, and skill performance, emphasizes that the best interventions are ones that work. He stressed that it is the responsibility of the consultant and school personnel, rather than the students themselves, to establish a plan that will not fail. One way to accomplish this is by helping school staff embrace the notion of behavioral shaping. “Creating achievable next-step goals can be a step towards increasing success, as indicated by increasing student buy-in, teacher adherence, and the progress towards establishing higher expectations,” he said.

### Facing challenges

There are barriers to doing this work. When schools lose funding, outside consultants for mental health support are often among the first budget items cut, Tanner said. There can also be pushback that requires a psychologist to adjust their procedures or how they communicate the importance of the work, Thayer said. Individual teachers might resist evidence-based interventions based on their own ideas about what works. Some districts

might hesitate to include questions about gender identity or sexuality on surveys, limiting data on wellness and bullying, and some individuals might oppose social-emotional learning altogether. This can be challenging, especially for early-career professionals, Thayer said.

“One of the hurdles will be resistance to the very concept of things like mental health for kids,” he said. “And yet I would argue based upon our various ethics and principles in APA, like beneficence for all, that we are somewhat obligated to step in and do that work.”

APA is launching a new model for bringing psychological expertise into schools called Healthy Habits for School Communities, a framework that provides evidence-informed practices to systems at the classroom, school and district, and state and national levels. Each level offers recommended “habits” to promote psychological well-being, backed by evidence and including instructions on how to implement those habits. Systems can pick the habits most important to them, said McDonald, who will oversee APA’s implementation and scaling of this initiative. For example, a classroom teacher might want to foster a positive classroom culture, and the framework will offer ways to do that by encouraging self-efficacy and a sense of belonging. The framework also includes action items to enhance psychological well-being at the school level, such as improving staff collaboration. At the state and national agency levels, the framework includes habits such as implementing data use to promote health and allocating resources toward psychological well-being.

The project is in the pilot phase, with plans to move into districts serving more than 15,000 students this

fall. The goal, Barnes said, is to move away from disconnected, one-off interventions and toward a more comprehensive look at the entire education system. Psychologists will get the chance to bring their expertise to every level, McDonald said, and the hope is that natural collaborations will evolve from there. It is all new, she said—and an example of how psychologists and schools are finding ways to innovate in the face of great student need.

“We’re building the model now,” she said, “which is really exciting.” ■

### FURTHER READING

**Advancing consultation and family, school, and community collaboration**  
Gormley, M. J., et al.  
*School Psychology Review*, 2024

**Supporting teachers’ use of classroom management strategies via different school-based consultation models: Which is more cost-effective for whom?**  
DeFouw, E. R., et al.  
*School Psychology Review*, 2024

**Teleconsultation in schools: A guide to collaborative practice**  
Fischer, A. J., & Bloomfield, B. S.  
APA, 2024