Increasing School-Based Mental Health Services with a “Grow Your Own” School Psychology Program

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Abstract

There is a nationwide shortage of school psychologists, and while NASP has recommended ways to increase recruitment and retention, the research on recruiting and retaining school psychologists, especially in high-need areas, is limited. Teacher education researchers have begun to address teacher shortages through “grow your own” training programs, but the research on these programs is also limited. A team of university school psychology faculty and regional education agency administrators developed a “Grow Your Own” school psychologist re-specialization training program to support recruiting and retaining school psychologists in rural areas. It is difficult for rural education agencies to recruit young professionals to their area, but it may be possible to recruit professionals currently living in the area to school graduate training programs. The partnership between the university school psychology training program and the regional education agencies addresses the school psychology shortage in one Midwestern state by recruiting special education and related educational professionals to school psychology. A focus of this program is to place more mental health professionals (i.e., school psychologists) in rural schools, therefore addressing the deficiency of mental health services in these rural areas. The partnership and the program are described, as are opportunities and challenges that the team has experienced to date.

Keywords “Grow Your Own” · School psychology shortage · Re-specialization · School-Based Mental Health Services

Data from the 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health revealed that approximately 17% of US children between the ages of 5 and 18 have experienced at least one mental health disorder (Whitney and Peterson 2019). The data suggests vast differences across the 50 states, with prevalence rates ranging from 7.6% in Hawaii to 27.2% in Maine. In 2019, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2019) reported that suicide was the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15 and 34. In one Midwestern state, data from a 2018 survey of 6th, 8th, and 11th grade students revealed an overall increase of 53% between 2012 and 2018, in the percentage of students who reported having a plan to complete death by suicide within the past year (Iowa Consortium for Substance Abuse Research and Evaluation 2019). Approximately one in 10 students,

which is about three students in every classroom, reported that they had a plan to kill themselves in the past 12 months. This increase was seen for both males and females (Iowa Consortium for Substance Abuse Research and Evaluation 2019). However, data have also shown that less than half of all children and adolescents with a mental health disorder received treatment (Whitney and Peterson 2019). Qualitative data gathered from families, professionals, and advocates as part of a Children’s Mental Health System Strategic Plan in the fall of 2018 revealed a number of themes suggesting why so few children and adolescents receive treatment. Themes included a lack of services or service providers, lack of support for families, poor access to care, waiting lists for mental health providers, and children having to miss school to get the mental health support they need (Iowa Department of Human Services 2018). Families also reported the services they needed were not available in their rural communities and that their children were often put on waiting lists for needed services, prolonging the amount of time their children were in distress. Clearly, additional supports are needed to assist children and their families in accessing the help and supports they need.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP 2015), school psychologists are

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“uniquely positioned” to promote, provide, and support mental and behavioral health services in schools due to their training and preparation in both academic and social and emotional services, collaboration with others, and knowledge of both cultural and organizational contexts of schools (p. 1). In the last 15–20 years, more children have been referred and identified for social-emotional and behavior concerns partly due to increased recognition that school psychologists have training and experience in the area of mental health (Merrell et al. 2012). Furthermore, school psychologists are specified as both qualified health providers and mental health service providers in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) if they hold either an Education Specialist (Ed.S.) or a Doctoral degree and are licensed by either the state’s education agency and/or by the state’s psychology board (NASP 2015).

School psychologists are important members of school teams. And, while their roles vary, often dependent upon the location in which they practice, they all share a common goal—to promote the success of the students they serve through the use of principles, skills, and procedures derived from the field of psychology within an educational context (American Psychological Association [APA] n.d.; Merrell et al. 2012). School psychologists receive advanced graduate training (APA n.d.; NASP n.d.) to prepare them for their professional practice. They have specific training to develop and enhance skills to promote student success in academics and learning as well as prevention and intervention services to promote social and emotional functioning and mental health.

However, there continues to be a shortage of school psychologists throughout the nation. In a recent research summary, NASP stated that only seven states were able to meet the NASP standard of one school psychologist to every 500–700 students (NASP 2017). The average ratio across the USA is one student to 1381 school psychologists (Walcott et al. 2017). Rural areas are likely to be at greater risk of shortages, often because it is difficult to recruit young school psychologists to these areas (Clopton and Knesting 2006; Goforth et al. 2017; Iowa School Psychologists Association 2019). Research suggests practicing in rural areas has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include being part of the community, long-term involvement with students, and good relationships with students and colleagues (Clopton and Knesting 2016; Goforth et al. 2017). Disadvantages include limited access to support services for students outside of school, a lack of resources in rural schools, lengthy travel time, inadequate time for service delivery, and difficulties associated with staff turnover. Clopton and Knesting (2006) suggest, “When considering taking a position in a rural area, it is important for practitioners to consider the match between their strengths and needs and the characteristics of this type of position” (p. 8). Efforts to recruit school psychologists into rural areas should include education about school psychology practice in these areas.

As the shortage of school psychologists is predicted to continue (Castillo et al. 2014), NASP (2017)) has made several recommendations for addressing them, including a focus on recruitment, more opportunities for re-specialization within graduate programs, and a focus on retention of currently practicing school psychologists. To address the school psychology shortage and the increased need for mental health services in one Midwestern state, school psychology faculty and professionals from two different educational service agencies collaborated to develop a “Grow Your Own” program. Because the state, at the time of this manuscript, only has one practitioner-level program, the team decided efforts solely focused on directing current graduate students into hard-to-staff areas could increase the shortage in other areas of the state. Efforts focused only on increasing the number of graduate students in the program offered no guarantee the additional students would choose positions in the rural areas. The team decided a “Grow Your Own” program had the greatest likelihood of increasing the number of school psychologists in the high-need rural areas. This article provides an overview of this collaborative partnership and resulting grant-funded re-specialization program, along with a discussion of some of the unforeseen opportunities and obstacles experienced during the first year of the program.

Recruitment and Retention Strategies for Re-specialization

The literature on recruiting school psychologists into high-need areas is limited. NASP has made several recommendations for recruiting practitioners into the field, including increasing awareness of the profession among high school and undergraduate students and of adults in related professions who may want to re-specialize (NASP 2016). NASP (2016) suggests:

Re-specialization generally refers to a process by which an individual with experience or graduate preparation in a related field expands their current knowledge and skills through formal school psychology programming in order to achieve a degree or credential as a school psychologist. (p. 9)

Offering adults opportunities to re-specialize may increase the number of school psychologists entering the field, but it may not address the difficulties with recruiting them into high-need, rural areas. The recommendations for recruiting teachers into high-need areas may be helpful in developing school psychologist re-specialization programs that specifically address the school psychologist shortage in rural areas. These recommendations include creating teacher residencies, offering financial incentives, and developing local pipelines into the education profession (Aragon 2018; Learning Policy Institute 2016a; Learning Policy Institute 2016b). We developed our program using these recommendations.

Teacher Residencies

Teacher residency programs offer individuals with a college degree a route to teacher certification that includes extensive field experiences closely aligned with coursework. Residencies were designed to assist with the recruitment and retention of teachers in high-need subject areas and in schools that are difficult to staff, and the extensive field experience occurs in a district where the resident has committed to work for several years following certification (Guha et al. 2016). Guha et al. (2016) reviewed 11 residency programs and found 80 to 90% of program graduates stayed in the district for at least three years, while 70 to 80% were still in the district after five years. They also suggested that residency programs are a promising method of increasing the diversity of the teaching profession.

Guha et al. (2016) suggested a number of key components in residency programs. To demonstrate how we have incorporated these recommendations into our re-specialization program, we have included specific examples from our program following each recommendation. Guha et al.'s first recommendation is to make sure programs are built on strong university-district partnerships. The partnership between our university and the educational agency who will help train and ultimately hire these recertified school psychologists was built on a long-standing relationship. One of our faculty members worked for the agency for 10 years, and we have worked with agency staff on other state-wide projects. Second, Guha et al. suggested the district identifies specific areas of need and residents are recruited to fill those needs. These residents have the opportunity to get to know the schools and community where they will eventually teach before their first year of teaching. According to Guha et al. (2016), residency programs included the recruitment of high-ability individuals to fill specific needs. The western part of our state is quite rural and has a dire shortage of mental health providers. Recruiting individuals who already live and work in these communities and who already have master's degrees will help meet this need for mental health providers in rural areas of the state.

The third and fourth components of residency programs consist of lengthy, field-based experiences and coursework that are connected to the field experiences (Guha et al. 2016). Our program includes scaffolded practicum experiences and a year-long internship to provide supported transition to independence in the school psychologist position. The practicum and internship experiences will occur in the agency where the student will work following the completion of the program. The fifth and sixth components of residency programs are related to high-quality mentoring during the residency and support following graduation (Guha et al. 2016). Program students will continue to have access to mentoring from university faculty, and because some of the courses are taught by doctoral level agency staff, program students will

have regular access to mentoring from these professionals and leaders within the agency. The seventh component focuses on (a) the importance of having a cohort model so residents can develop relationships with other residents and have the opportunity to discuss their experiences, and (b) the importance of high-quality placements where residents can work with experienced teachers. This program is a cohort model and this cohort of students will be hired by our partner educational agencies where they will work with experienced school psychologists. Program students also take multiple classes with the on-campus students, including the classes connected with practica and internship. Both groups of students are also on-campus at the same time for one week during the summer. During the internship year, students will consult with each other on a regular basis. These opportunities for interaction encourage relationships that may continue past graduate school and serve as support as students transition to their careers. The final component is offering financial incentives to attract high-quality residents and retain them in the high-need schools (Guha et al. 2016).

Financial incentives

Financial incentives include loan forgiveness (Feng and Sass 2018; Steele et al. 2009), tuition reimbursement for courses leading to certification in a high-need subject area (Feng and Sass 2018), and retention bonuses (Feng and Sass 2018). The research on the effectiveness of these programs is limited. The United States Department of Education (USDOE) administers three programs that involve financial incentives to recruit and retain teachers in high-need schools and high-need subjects: specifically, the TEACH Grant, Stafford Teacher Loan Forgiveness, and Perkins Loan Teacher Cancellation. The TEACH Grant provides students with up to a \$4000 grant per year while they are in college. Students either fulfill a service requirement or the grant is converted to a loan. The other two programs provide loan forgiveness for qualified service (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2015). A U.S. Government Accountability Office report (2015) indicated a low percentage of those eligible actually participate in these programs (i.e., estimated 19% participation for TEACH and less than 1% participation for the other two programs). The USDOE indicated the TEACH grant program has not existed long enough for there to be meaningful outcome data, so the impact of the program is currently unknown (U. S. Government Accountability Office 2015).

Teachers also have access to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program (PSLF). The PSLF forgives the remaining federal student loan balances of public service professionals, including school psychologists working in public schools, after they have made 120 qualifying monthly payments while paying their loans on an income-based repayment plan (Federal Student Aid n.d.). While school psychologists

cannot typically access other educator loan forgiveness programs, the PSLF is one that school psychologists could access; however, it has been difficult for public service professionals to get their loans forgiven (Whistle 2019) and this may continue to be an obstacle for teachers and school psychologists, which indicates that alternate financial incentives should be considered.

A study of the Florida Critical Teacher Shortage Program suggested financial incentive programs may have a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of teachers in high-need areas or high-need subjects. Feng and Sass (2018) found loan forgiveness for teachers in high-need content areas increased retention in some of the shortage areas. The effectiveness varied depending on the amount of the loan forgiveness payments, with greater sums leading to increased retention. Retention bonuses were also effective in increasing retention. Finally, tuition reimbursement for courses leading to an additional certification in a high-need area increased the likelihood the teacher would earn the certification (Feng and Sass 2018). While we cannot offer student loan forgiveness, we are able to offer lower tuition, fees, and other financial supports to ensure the financial burden of recertification is limited.

“Grow Your Own” Programs

“Grow your own” programs typically focus on recruiting local high school students (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2016; Texas Comprehensive Center 2018) or adults from the school and community (Gist et al. 2019) into the teaching profession. South Carolina developed a “grow your own” program through the establishment of Centers for the Re-Education and Advancement of Teachers in Special Education (CREATE) in 2003. The CREATE currently supports individuals in completing the needed coursework to obtain licensure in special education. The program supports individuals obtaining initial licensure, as well as add-on and alternative licensure in special education (Sutton et al. 2014). A study of the CREATE participants who completed the coursework for special education licensure between 2003 and 2011 indicated 93% of the participants were pursuing add-on or alternative licensure (Sutton et al. 2014). The final report for the 2016–2017 academic year indicated 87% of the program completers were employed for the 2017–2018 year in their same district. This report also indicates there to be 1025 program completers in the program’s 14 years in existence (Sutton et al. 2017).

The research on recruiting and retaining school psychologists in high-need areas is limited. Although there is some research to support different approaches for teacher recruitment and retention in high-need areas, there is no research on the use of these components to recruit and retain school psychologists. Furthermore, there is no research on the

efficacy of a combination of components of the different approaches. The following is a description of a new collaborative program that combines these three approaches to create a local pipeline of school psychologists using a “grow your own” model. The program is funded by a Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities grant (Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant) through the USDOE.

Program Description

Collaborative Partnership

The goal of the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration grant is “to support and demonstrate innovative partnerships to train school-based mental health services providers for employment in schools and local educational agencies (LEAs)” (USDOE 2019, p. 2). There are two types of local education agencies in this state. One type is the typical school district and the other is a larger regional agency that provides student support personnel, like school psychologists, to the area school districts. After a brief conversation among school psychology program faculty, one of the faculty contacted the Director of Special Education of a regional education agency in a rural part of the state. The Director had contacted the school psychology program coordinator earlier in the academic year about ways to increase the number of school psychologists in his agency, so proposing this partnership seemed promising. The partnership expanded to include another of the rural regional education agencies to ensure an adequate number of education professionals from which to recruit into the program.

The program described below combines the three recruitment and retention approaches previously described to address the shortage of school psychologists in a rural part of the state. The program targets master’s level special education professionals who are interested in re-specializing to become school psychologists focused on providing mental health and behavioral supports to students in their current geographic location. NASP (2016) suggests professionals who want to re-specialize may have concerns about accessing a quality training program, scheduling difficulties, balancing other commitments, and planning for the training and transition. They suggest effective programs need to attend to the needs of these students as course times, locations, and delivery methods are set (NASP 2016). The team addressed these potential barriers in the development of the current program, which is detailed below.

The resulting program is a 44-credit Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) program taught part-time by both the university, school psychology faculty, and doctoral level school psychologists in the partnering agencies. The following information details our “Grow Your Own” program, focusing on how the

program combines elements of the three described recruitment and retention approaches, as well as the potential concerns of individuals interested in re-specializing as indicated by NASP.

Program Components

“Grow Your Own” programs focus on recruiting local individuals into the education profession in high-need areas; as research suggests, educators are more likely to take jobs near their hometown (Engel and Cannata 2015; Reininger 2012). Therefore, instead of focusing on methods to recruit new school psychologists into high-need, rural areas, the team decided recruiting individuals from the areas of need would increase the likelihood of retaining these individuals in their positions long term. These professionals would have experience working in rural areas, as well as some understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of doing so. As a result, students recruited into the program are full-time professionals working in the area covered by the two regional education agencies. They hold master’s degrees in special education or a closely related field. Recruiting students with similar backgrounds allows the required coursework to be fairly consistent, which is efficient and cost-effective.

As noted above, teacher residency programs involve integrating theory with extensive practical experiences. The current program includes the seven key components of residency programs as indicated by Guha et al. (2016). The program is a partnership between the university and the two regional education agencies (first “grow your own” component). The administration in the two regional education agencies identified the need for school psychologists, and the program is targeting the re-specialization of high-quality professionals (second “grow your own” component). The program is designed to educate two cohorts of five students. Cohorts of five allow the students to be integrated effectively into some of the on-campus courses and do not overburden the regional education agencies with excessive practicum supervision and mentoring responsibilities. Admissions decisions were and will continue to be made by the university faculty and the regional education agency partners.

The course sequence is designed so students can continue working full-time in their current positions, which allows students to make connections between the content of their courses and experiences in their practice (third and fourth “grow your own” components). The grant provides funding to cover “substitutes” for work hours missed for practicum. Moreover, several courses include applied assignments that are completed in the schools. For example, the behavioral intervention course includes the development, implementation, and evaluation of two different interventions and the systems consultation class includes a needs assessment and an intervention plan.

The program is 44 credits, with 24 of the required credits taught by university school psychology faculty. University faculty teach these courses using synchronous online technology. In addition to online coursework, students come to campus two weeks each summer for some face-to-face class sessions and other professional development activities. Seventeen credits are taught by licensed school psychologists, with a doctorate in school psychology or a related field, employed by the partnering agencies (see Table 1 for the program of study). The intention is for these classes to be face-to-face at a central location in one of the agencies. The university school psychology faculty meet with these adjunct instructors to discuss course content, share instructional materials, and consult as needed during each academic session. Three credits of the program (one course) are co-taught by a university faculty member and an appropriately qualified school psychologist or related professional from one of the area education agencies. This early childhood assessment course will be taught during summer 2021. This course will include a face-to-face format with the adjunct faculty member, as well as face-to-face time with the university professor at the university. Synchronous online technology will be used for some class periods. The university faculty member and the area education agency professional will meet using online web conferencing technology to plan, and the university faculty member will share instructional materials as appropriate.

There are several field-based courses in which the grant cohort will participate. First, there are two practicum courses that require a specific number of hours of field-based practice with a licensed school psychologist. The first requires 140 h and the second requires 240 h. While the grant cohort students are working in education, they need to spend time experiencing education from the perspective of a school psychologist and to have time for supervision with a school psychologist. We anticipated this may be difficult with schedules, but we planned to provide financial support for substitute professionals when needed. This allowed each student to spend time away from their current role to learn the practice of school psychology. The university faculty and area education agency partners collaborated in making practicum placements to ensure students are receiving high-quality experiences and supervision. The two practicum courses meet once per week for 2 to 3 h. The courses include discussions between both the grant cohort and the on-campus cohort of practicum experiences and some additional content that is not provided in other program courses (e.g., crisis response, talented and gifted students, preparation for job interviews, and tips for the internship experience), and has allowed for brainstorming and problem-solving across geographic locations within the state as well as for multiple perspectives and varying experiences, past and current. The university supervisor for these courses has ongoing communication with school-based supervisors throughout the semester. Participation in the practicum

Table 1 Program of study

Course number	Course title	Credit hours	Taught by GHAEA or UNI?
Semester 1 (spring)			
EDPSYCH 6240	Introduction to school psychology	3	GHAEA
MEASRES 6282	Individual intellectual assessment	4	GHAEA
Summer 1			
MEASRES 6283	Academic assessment and interventions	4	GHAEA
Summer 2			
SPED 6260	Special education law and policy	3	UNI (online)
MEASRES 6284	Psychosocial assessment	4	UNI (online)
Semester 2 (fall)			
EDPSYCH 6270	Behavioral interventions in school settings	3	UNI (online)
MEASRES 6260	Monitoring progress in individuals and groups	3	UNI (online)
EDPSYCH 6290	Practicum III	2	UNI (online)
Semester 3 (spring)			
EDPSYCH 6272	Systems-level consultation	3	GHAEA
EDPSYCH 6289	Seminar in educational psychology: counseling children	3	GHAEA
EDPSYCH 6290	Practicum IV	3	UNI
Summer 3			
MEASRES 6287	Early childhood assessment and intervention	3	Co-taught
Semester 4–semester 5 (fall, spring)			
EDPSYCH 6291	Internship in school psychology	6	

courses provides those students within the grant cohort the opportunity to learn about school psychology practice in other area education agencies across the state, as on-campus student placements typically include three to four education agencies in closer proximity to the university. School psychology graduate students are also required to complete a full-time internship. The students in the internship course meet in person one time per semester and they participate in an online discussion on an ongoing basis. They have monthly contact with the university supervisor. Interns often consult with each other about their work. These interactions are important to promote high-quality supervision and mentoring (fifth and sixth components).

The seventh component of residency programs indicated by Guha et al. (2016) is a cohort model that provides students with opportunities to discuss their experiences. The students in the re-specialization program take their courses together, and they also participate in several courses with the face-to-face, full-time university school psychology students. These courses have provided the program cohorts with opportunities to build relationships, through discussions, group projects, and class activities, and to share their experiences in practicum and other field-based experiences. The program also includes students coming to the university campus for two weeks each summer for coursework and other professional development activities. The eighth component of teacher residency

programs is financial support for students. The financial supports for students in this program are detailed in the next section.

The program was developed to provide the same quality of experiences the full-time, face-to-face UNI cohorts receive. The NASP Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists (2010) indicate training programs should work to help students develop a “strong affiliation” (p. 2) with school psychology. The program includes a number of opportunities for students to develop a strong affiliation to the profession. The grant program cohorts are invited to participate in state association activities, including association-organized workshops. Second, students have the opportunity to attend the state association annual conference with other school psychologists from across the state. Third, students attend the annual Midwest Youth Mental Health conference with the university School Psychology faculty and some of the full-time, face-to-face students. Attending the conference provides additional time for interaction, as well as discussion of the session topics and their application to school psychology practice. As supplemental training, students will take the PREPaRE Workshop 1: Crisis Prevention and Preparedness: Comprehensive School Safety Planning and PREPaRE Workshop 2: Crisis Intervention and Recovery: The Roles of School-Based Mental Health Professionals.

They will complete this training at the university campus during their second summer in the program.

Financial Incentives for Students

Offering financial incentives for students going into high-need areas is another approach to recruiting and retaining educators. The students in this program must have a master's degree in special education or a related field, and they are currently working in some role within their regional education agencies. Although the Ed.S. degree, and associated training, will prepare them to work as mental health professionals in the schools, there will be little, if any, financial benefit to these individuals obtaining an Ed.S. in School Psychology. As a result, it is important to remove or minimize as many barriers to obtaining the training and degree as possible.

The program budget includes a number of items intended to remove some of the financial barriers to returning to the graduate school. First, the budget covers a portion of university faculty salary for the courses that will include the program cohorts, as well as the cost of the adjunct faculty teaching at a location in the regional education agency. As a result, the university is able to offer students a significant reduction in tuition cost. Students will pay \$75/credit for courses (15% of the 2019–2020 tuition cost for graduate credits). Fees, with the exception of a technology fee, will be waived. Second, the program will purchase the students' books each semester. Third, the program will cover the cost of student memberships to both the state and national associations. The state association membership allows students to attend state workshops at a reduced fee and allow them access to the "members only" content on the website (discussion board, reviews of mobile apps, reviews of professional books, white papers, etc.). The annual NASP membership includes eight issues of the association newspaper and a quarterly peer-reviewed journal. Members also have access to past issues of publications, downloadable handouts, access to online communities of school psychologists, and discounts on a range of professional development activities. Finally, the program will cover the cost of the professional license needed for the internship year and the registration cost for the national exam required by the program. Students in the program must agree to work in their respective agencies for a minimum of 3 years, and they sign a contract with the regional education agency at the time of admission to the program. Students who do not complete the 3 years of service may be required to pay back some of the cost of student travel, supplies, adjunct pay, and supplemental training. The amount will be prorated for those that complete at least one year of service, but not the required three. Each instance will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Recruitment, Admission, and Getting Started

In October 2019, university faculty and regional education agency partners recruited professionals who were interested in becoming school psychologists. They targeted their recruitment efforts on special education and related professionals in the rural areas served by the partner regional education agencies. They hosted a recruiting event for those interested in November 2019, and applications for the program were due December 1, 2019. University faculty and agency partners served as the admissions committee to make final admission decisions. Five students were accepted into the first program cohort to start in January 2020, but one person decided to withdraw his/her application due to family obligations. The plan is to have five students in the second cohort beginning in January 2022. Those who were not accepted in the first cohort are able to reapply for the cohort.

The four students who began coursework in January 2020 have training backgrounds in school counseling and special education. Of the four students, two of them have master's degrees in special education and are currently working as special education consultants for one of the regional education agencies. They have an average of 11 years of experience as special education professionals. Another student has a master's degree in education and is currently working in an administrative position within one of the regional education agencies. She has over 30 years of experience as an educator and educational administrator. The final student has a master's degree in school counseling and is currently working as a school counselor in a small, rural school district. She has 16 years of experience as a school counselor and educator.

The first cohort began coursework in the spring semester of 2020 and will graduate in summer of 2022. Individual student's program of study were adjusted based on courses completed as part of their master's degree; however, all students must meet the NASP training requirements through courses in both their master's and Ed.S. programs. Students will complete three semesters of coursework during the regular academic year, taking seven to nine credits per semester, as well as courses and supplemental training during two summers. The final year of the program is a full-time internship.

During the first semester of program implementation, the cohort attended face-to-face courses on Saturdays at a high school location agreed upon by the four students and adjunct instructors. They chose a central location based on where the students and instructors lived. Each person drove no more than two hours each way to this location. The adjunct instructors chose to mix online and face-to-face instruction to minimize the amount of travel for the students. Students and adjunct faculty receive funds to support their travel to classes. The second half of the semester was interrupted by COVID-19 and was finished fully online. The program was planned to include a face-to-face course this first summer, but due to

COVID-19, this course was transitioned to online instruction. The other summer courses were planned as a mix of online and face-to-face instruction in the university campus, but these courses have also been transitioned to fully online.

Project Evaluation

Two goals, both including several objectives within each, were developed to help evaluate the success of the “Grow Your Own” program. The first goal of the project is to increase access to school-based mental health services in high-need, rural areas of the western part of the state. The second goal of the project is to create an accessible and effective “grow your own” school psychology program. Both formative and summative information will be collected during the grant period to determine whether the program met each goal and included objectives. Formative data will be collected through (a) enrollment data at the beginning of each academic term for both cohorts; (b) each student’s program of study to ensure adequate progress towards graduation; (c) academic data, including course grades and practicum evaluations completed by field-based, school psychology supervisors; and (d) interviews with each student on accessibility of the program (e.g., location of courses, cost of the program, student’s ability to manage the coursework of the program). Summative data will be collected through (a) enrollment data from throughout the program; (b) employment data from each regional education agency each year to determine whether there has been an increase in school psychologists over the 5-year grant time period; (c) district survey data within each regional agency each year to determine whether there has been an increase in school-based mental health services over the 5-year grant period; (d) grant cohort graduation numbers; (e) academic data from the internship year, including PRAXIS exam data, field-based internship supervisor ratings, and comprehensive exam data; and (f) compiling the formative interview data gathered during each year of the 5-year program.

Formative evaluation data for the first year of the grant suggests that we are meeting our enrollment goals and that the cohort students are progressing towards graduation and learning at a rate similar to their peers in the face-to-face program. We have accepted and retained four students in the first grant cohort. All four students are just one semester of coursework from completing the course sequence and starting their internship. In order to evaluate the learning of the grant cohort students, along with course grades, we used proficiency in administration and scoring of cognitive assessments as the metric of comparison with their peers in the face-to-face program. Since graduate students generally achieve high grade point averages, we concluded that using this metric would demonstrate greater sensitivity to differences between the groups. The face-to-face students needed, on average, 1.43 administration attempts before reaching proficiency in

administration of cognitive assessments, and the grant cohort students needed an average of 2 administration attempts before reaching proficiency in administration of cognitive assessments. The grant cohort students needed an average of 2 scoring attempts to reach proficiency in scoring cognitive assessments, and the students in the face-to-face cohort needed an average of 2.45 scoring attempts to reach proficiency in scoring cognitive assessments. While the grant cohort was quicker at reaching proficiency at scoring, the students in the face-to-face program were quicker at reaching proficiency in administration of cognitive assessments. These two cohorts had different instructions, so this difference may be due to instructor bias rather than actual differences in learning; however, the grant cohort students and the face-to-face students all met proficiency by the end of the academic term.

Furthermore, our formative evaluation data suggest that the grant cohort students believe the program to be accessible. When asked how the program was going so far, all four immediately responded positively and said they were excited to continue. All four also noted that the program had been a lot of work and often stressful. They reported the stress was not so much because of the work itself but due to completely the work on top of a demanding full-time job and family. On the other hand, they also all reported that their peers and professors have been supportive and the learning to be excellent. Primarily, the program has gone as they expected and similar to what was described during recruiting, except the differences that arose due to COVID-19. These students began classes in spring of 2020, driving several hours each way to a central location for face-to-face classes on Saturdays. When COVID-19 hit, these two courses went online through Zoom. Zoom has worked well, although the students reported that they would have preferred face-to-face, especially for the very involved assessment courses. Overall, students reported that these changes have had little major impact, and as one student reported, “The learning has been as good as expected, maybe even better!” Part of the reason things are going well is the support from their four-person cohort. One student reported, “Learning with them is the best! They communicate and collaborate constantly. They have a diverse set of strengths that the others draw on. They share reports—rough drafts and peer review—even if not required” In addition, the structure of the program allows them to keep working in their schools and be with their families. The program works for them as they continue to work, and they reported that, financially, the grant support is very helpful. The students stated that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for them to complete the Ed.S. degree without the financial support. “Where else could I get an Ed.S. for \$ 4000 and have a job?” Finally, they reported that the program is accessible, and they all agreed that they are grateful for the program and the opportunity. One student reported that this program, “will build up the supply of school psychs that we so desperately need.”

Opportunities, Obstacles, and Moving Forward

Opportunities

Since receiving the grant and beginning the process of recruiting and admitting the first cohort of students, the university faculty and regional education agency partners have had the opportunity to speak to other regional education agency administrators, school psychologists across the state, and school district-level administrators. Through these conversations, the team has learned that there is both a strong desire for more school psychologists across the state, and a desire for the current school psychologist work force to be more involved with school-based mental health practice.

These discussions have resulted in a small shift in how some regional education agency and district-level administrators view the role of the school psychologist. Traditionally, this state has addressed mental health difficulties using strict behavioral protocols and school psychologists' roles focus on evaluation and consultation for students with behavioral difficulties. This shift has motivated systems-level change across the state. The partner regional education agencies are beginning to re-define the role of school psychologists to include providing some direct mental health services to students. Furthermore, other regional education agencies have started similar work that includes increasing capacity to address mental health difficulties within their school psychologist workforce. Conversations with state leaders suggest that such changes will spread across the state and the state department of education may be interested in supporting these changes to school psychologist roles across the state.

Given these conversations about and adjustments to the role of school psychologists, there is more attention on school psychologist training and the many skills school psychologists possess coming out of quality training programs. In the past, school psychologists were perceived as educational assessors; however, increasingly, school psychologists are spending more of their time providing various academic, behavioral, and mental health interventions (Larson and Choi 2010), and district staff report the importance of and desire for intervention services (Watkins et al. 2001). As the team continues to discuss the implementation and outcomes of the "Grow Your Own" program, there will be opportunities to educate school district staff, regional education agency administrators, legislators, and families about the comprehensive role of school psychologists and the positive impact school psychologists can have on the educational system and student outcomes.

Obstacles

While the opportunities experienced with the development and initial implementation of this program have been

impactful, the team has also experienced some obstacles. Some of these obstacles could have been avoided with improved planning, and some of these were not within the control of the team. The first obstacle was recruiting five students into the program within two months of receiving notice of grant acceptance. The team developed a rigorous timeline for the five-year grant without considering the need to encourage five educational professionals to return to graduate school with a few weeks notice. Prospective students needed to consider the financial burden and the personal and family burden of taking additional graduate courses for 18 months. The team developed recruiting materials right away and began advertising the program within a couple weeks, and initially, there were nearly 40 interested prospective students. However, after the timeline, program length, and cost were revealed in detail, the number of interested professionals decreased. The team accepted five students, but one declined admission due to family obligations. The next cohort is set to begin courses in January 2022, and the team will have more time to plan recruiting methods, materials, and information. Furthermore, the team is hopeful that several of those who were initially interested in the program will apply for the upcoming cohort given they have more time to consider and plan for the impact to their lives. This recruiting cycle has provided us with information we can use moving forward with recruiting the next cohort. Any program considering a re-specialization program will want to consider the timeline for recruiting and beginning the program. Students recruited for re-specialization likely have current employment, families, financial obligations, and other commitments they must consider as they determine whether they can make space for further graduate study.

The current cohort includes three special education professionals and a school counselor, all living and working approximately 200 miles from the university. The experiential background of these students created some unique obstacles. Training and practice differences associated with each student's current professional role has made planning for course content and instruction challenging as each may need different or additional content in specific areas and/or time for additional practice. For example, there is one student with background and years of practice in early childhood, so how this influences her participation in the early childhood course (i.e., knowledge of early childhood development and its impact on practice, administration, scoring, and interpretation of assessment instruments) must be taken into consideration. The team had hoped to minimize these differences by recruiting special education professionals and educators with master's degrees, and while this probably minimized some of the potential differences in student experience and prior knowledge, programs considering re-specialization will want to take care in determining admission criteria to both minimize the need for supplemental instruction and also maximize the variety of perspectives introduced during classroom discussion.

Distance from the university also provides unique challenges as their access to faculty, materials, and university resources is more limited than those in the face-to-face cohorts. While the use of synchronous platforms, such as Zoom, and intentional transporting of materials has helped in this area, team planning has been ongoing. The distance has also mandated the need for creative planning across faculty and adjunct instructors within the regional education agency. Sharing of syllabi and course materials is ongoing, as is communication about content, instructional practices, and individual needs for practice with different instruments and/or work in specific areas of the assessment process. Field experiences have also highlighted the need for ongoing communication between faculty and adjunct instructors. As the students within the grant cohort all continue to work full-time, creative planning for the required practicum hours and time with, and supervision from, school psychologists in the field is necessary. Furthermore, considerations for supervision from University faculty are important. Students within the grant cohort participate in a University supervision seminar for two to three hours weekly through a synchronous platform with second year students within the face-to-face cohort, which allows all students to learn about practice within different area education agencies throughout the state. Thoughtful scheduling to include both cohorts of students has been necessary, as is development of seminar activities and expectations to account for differences in practicum experiences and future career needs. As one example, representatives from regional education agencies around the state often visit the University practicum supervision seminar to talk about specific practices within their agency, with an eye towards recruiting. As those within the grant cohort will be working within their current education agency, their participation in these sessions was voluntary.

Another obstacle related to the needs of the grant cohort students was scheduling. Grant students have full-time jobs, family responsibilities, and other personal commitments. This has required early and creative scheduling of both synchronous online and face-to-face instruction. Originally, we planned to hold as many courses as possible in the face-to-face format at an agreed upon location based on where students lived and worked; however, due to the great distance between where each of the grant cohort students live, some of the face-to-face sessions were swapped for synchronous online sessions. Sessions scheduled for face-to-face format were reserved for necessary instruction with assessment materials.

Finally, differences in background and experiences between university and adjunct faculty within the regional education agencies may be perceived as both an obstacle and an opportunity. Ensuring that students in the “Grow Your Own” program receive training similar to the face-to-face students is a goal. University faculty are sharing instructional materials and communicating regularly with regional education agency adjuncts, but specific philosophies and practices within the

regional education agencies can influence what and how the content is presented. University faculty view this as an opportunity to learn from these partners and connect more closely with field-based practice in this area of the state. Regular discussion among university and adjunct faculty has been helpful in this area and is something that will continue throughout the duration of the grant.

Conclusions

There is a nationwide shortage of school psychologists, and while NASP has recommended ways to increase recruitment and retention, the research on recruiting and retaining school psychologists in high-need areas is limited. Teacher education researchers have begun to address teacher shortages through “Grow Your Own” training programs, but the research on these programs is also limited. The “Grow Your Own” school psychologist re-specialization training program described above is a new innovation in recruiting and retaining school psychologists, especially in rural areas. The partnership between the university school psychology training program and the regional education agencies addresses the school psychology shortage in one Midwestern state by recruiting special education and related educational professionals to school psychology. A focus of this program is to place more mental health professionals (i.e., school psychologists) in rural schools, therefore addressing the deficiency of mental health services in these rural areas. The team was successful in recruiting four students into the first cohort of the program, and they have completed the first year of courses. If outcomes for the program result in successfully decreasing the school psychologist shortage and increasing mental health services for students in this rural area of one Midwestern state, it may be possible to replicate the program in similar areas across the state and nation.

One of the issues that our team and future education agency and university partnerships must consider is sustainability of these programs. The program described here is supported with a federally funded grant that provides financial support for the students returning to graduate training and the university for hiring adjunct faculty. Once the grant is complete, it may be difficult to continue this program as it is currently designed without supplemental funding. Several uncertainties exist that supplemental funding is able to mitigate. It is uncertain if there will be interest from current professionals seeking further graduate study given that salaries are not likely to increase proportionally to the cost of the training. And, it is uncertain if university programs will support the hiring of adjunct or tenure-track faculty needed to continue intensive recertification programs. Local education agencies and state departments of education, in partnership with university programs, may have to readjust allocations of existing funds and develop

programs to encourage prospective students to enter school psychology graduate programs and to encourage universities to partner in training future professionals. If state legislatures begin to adopt some of the model legislation proposed by NASP (n.d.), then this may push improved funding for these types of recertification programs. State laws that require a 1:500 school psychologist to student ratio or laws that require school-based mental health services or laws that mandate a full range of school psychological services may act as catalysts to new funding solutions. For example, local education agencies might provide some incentives for professionals to return to graduate training through signing bonuses.

The “Grow Your Own” program described here is not a final solution to the school psychologists and mental health provider shortage, but it is a step forward in studying the effectiveness and feasibility of these types of programs. When the two grant cohorts have completed the program, we will likely have initial evidence to support decision-making on the creation of more “Grow Your Own” school psychology programs. At that time, the problem of funding and program sustainability can become the focus of future research and policy efforts.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest While Green Hills Area Education Agency was the primary recipient of the grant and Stephanie Dredge serves as the Primary Investigator, all remaining authors are being funded for their participation in the program that is being funded by the grant.

Ethics Approval While funded by a grant, this manuscript outlines development and implementation of a separate cohort of a university school psychology program. No ethical approval was required.

Informed Consent As some information was provided on students within the grant cohort within this manuscript, informed consent was obtained from all individual students.

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