



# Building and Sustaining Professional Pipelines:

## Practice Brief and Discussion Guide

School **Mental Health**  
 COLLABORATIVE

*A joint initiative between:*



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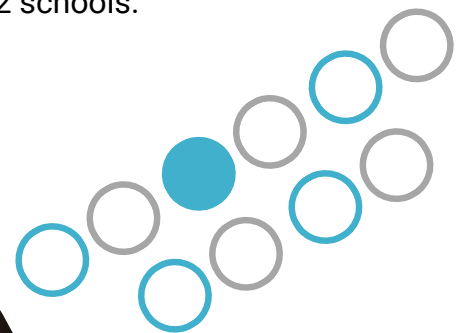
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# Introduction

Given the growing mental health needs among youth people, the need for school mental health professionals is multiplying. School psychologists, social workers, and counselors provide necessary services to address the academic, behavioral, and social emotional needs of students in school. However, school mental health professionals are in short supply and high demand in the United States. Professional standards recommend a ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students, as well as one school counselor and one school social worker for every 250 students. During the 2023-24 academic year, on average, there was only one school psychologist for every 1,065 students in K-12 schools (NASP, 2025) and one school counselor for every 376 students (ASCA, 2025). Further, no states meet the recommended ratio for school social workers (SSWAA, 2025). There is a critical shortage of needed professionals; effective recruitment strategies are needed to attract top candidates to K-12 schools, districts, and universities. This requires intentional effort to build and sustain professional pipelines within universities and school districts to ensure there are new and qualified school mental health professionals to fill existing vacancies. This practice brief provides a number of effective strategies to recruit school mental health professionals into graduate training programs, as well as ways school leaders can recruit and hire high quality school mental health professionals into K-12 schools.





# Effective Recruitment Materials and Strategies

Thoughtful, innovative, and compelling recruitment materials and strategies are an important initial strategy for building and sustaining a professional pipeline. Powerful storytelling and engaging delivery can help reach the best and brightest, and ultimately, attract them to the field (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017). No matter what materials are used, they need to be clear and visually appealing. Materials such as physical or digital flyers, websites, and presentations can include data on student outcomes, testimonials from current providers, and stories that illustrate the importance of this work. The goal is to showcase how vital school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists are to the well-being of kids and functioning of schools. Sharing successes and promoting positive impacts are powerful ways to attract people who are driven to make a difference in kids' lives. Other critical messaging may focus on how school mental health providers are supported within the district or university. For instance, information about ongoing professional development, organizational supports, and the work environment may be included in materials and other communication strategies. The following sections include specific recommendations for effective recruitment. Links throughout provide specific examples of these recommendations.

## Social Media and Online Job Platform

Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, and LinkedIn are just a few of the social media platforms that can be used not only to share job postings but also to highlight the work and impact of school mental health providers. Schools can spotlight individuals, which provides recognition and shows support for current practitioners or graduate students. Importantly, it also reveals to potential candidates how supportive the organization is, while demonstrating how SMH providers are truly champions for mental health. Spotlights can include brief videos or colorful graphics to capture attention.



Online job platforms like [Indeed](#) or [Handshake](#) can also be helpful for recruitment. Users of these platforms are able to search for employment, as well as post their own resumes. Posted job descriptions should be detailed, including accurate information that delineates job responsibilities. Keyword optimization and engaging headlines can also drive users to the job listing.

## Virtual Open Houses

[Virtual open houses](#) using Zoom or Teams provide candidates with an opportunity to connect informally and ask questions about things that may not be posted on a website or in a job listing. The [virtual open house](#) may begin with a brief presentation or overview of the job or profession, as well as a captivating impact story. Then, the panel or team can open it up to question & answer to attendees. It may be helpful to record the session for those unable to attend. The presenters should also follow up with a personal contact (e.g., email or call) to thank attendees for coming and offer to answer any additional questions.

## Flyers and Other Print Materials

While most people are accessing information electronically, print materials have not gone out of style or practice. Physical flyers can be effective when they are strategically placed or hand-delivered. For example, they may be tacked on bulletin boards near classrooms in graduate schools or placed in swag bags at professional conferences. Local coffee shops, community centers, grocery stores, and houses of worship may also provide outlets for colorful, easy-to-read, informative flyers. Developing relationships with people in the community can be particularly important for sharing information about local openings and potential careers, in conjunction with providing them print materials. QR codes may be helpful for reducing the amount of text on the flyer and linking to a website or job description. Flyer templates may be available through your organization or from other [online sources](#).

# Collaboration among LEAs, Educational Institutions, and Professional Organizations

Partnerships between K-12 school districts, universities, and professional organizations can help foster sustainable pipelines of school mental health professionals to redress workforce shortages. Such partnerships should focus on targeted outreach that raises awareness about career paths in school-based mental health professions. Some targeted awareness campaigns for school-based mental health careers might be aimed towards precollegiate or current college students who may have a burgeoning interest in pursuing graduate training in counseling, social work, or psychology, whereas other awareness campaigns may prioritize targeted outreach to current mental health professionals who may be open to school-based re-specialization.



Targeted outreach may also be geared toward current school personnel (e.g., teachers, paraeducators, or other support staff) who may want to shift to a school mental health career. The recruitment and re-specialization training of professionals who are already part of a school community can be achieved through “grow your own” programs. These programs usually involve a partnership between a school district or local education agency (LEA) and an institution of higher education (IHE) to identify potential candidates and support the transition of these current school personnel members to careers as school mental health professionals.



# Incentivizing Positions

Critical to the success of outreach efforts is for the targeted audience to understand the unique perks, incentives, and rewards of school mental health careers. For example, when targeting current college students who are considering career paths in education or mental health, outreach should highlight the scope, training, job opportunities, and future outlook of school mental health professions. One attractive inducement for pursuing a career in school mental health is the projected growth within the field, as workforce projections for school-based mental health professions indicate a faster than average job outlook through 2032 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). For example, approximately 29,100 job openings for school counselors are projected each year, on average, over the next decade.

Further incentivization may be necessary to support recruitment and retention of school mental health professionals. Financial incentives may include relocation stipends, sign-on bonuses, student loan forgiveness for service commitments, or even resources to cover childcare costs for parents. Waivers or reimbursement for application fees, conference travel, and continuing education opportunities are also compelling financial incentives that can both attract and retain school mental health professionals. Nonfinancial incentives are also important and can have a significant impact on overall career satisfaction. For example, the provision of flexible work arrangements, such as hybridized work schedules that permit 1 remote workday each week, may be particularly effective for the recruitment and retention of school mental health professionals working in rural communities who may also have long commutes. Another flexible work arrangement may be allowing full-time employees to have “40 in 4” workweeks (i.e., each 40-hour weekly work schedule comprised of four 10-hour workdays instead of five 8-hour workdays).





# Pipeline Programs

Increasing the workforce of school mental health professionals to a level at the ratios recommended by professional organizations of school psychology (1 school psychologist for every 500 students [1:500]), school counseling (1:250), and school social work (1:250) involves intentionally drawing more individuals into these fields and supporting them during their graduate education and beyond. Efforts to attract more practitioners begin with raising awareness of these rewarding professions to young people who are contemplating future career paths, and among adults in the education workforce (Dockweiler & Kaufman, 2024).

## Recruitment of High School Students

The pathway to becoming a school mental health professional can begin early for many seeking out a perfect career. High schools can serve as an important place to present on careers in school mental health that can feature school psychologists, school counselors and/or school social workers, sharing with high school students the varied roles and responsibilities held by these professionals. This might include local professionals sharing more about their job in the community and offering job shadowing opportunities for students who might be interested. Often, high schools offer natural opportunities to share more about careers in school mental health during career fairs, introductory psychology courses, health classes, and through positive relationships students build with mental health professionals in their own schools.

## Recruitment of Undergraduate Students

College classes provide an ideal opportunity to expose young adults to potential careers in school mental health services (Bocanegra et al., 2022). Through presentations in introductory education or psychology courses or at meetings of relevant college clubs (e.g., Psi Chi, Psychology Club, Kappa Delta Pi, or Aspiring Educators), graduate students and faculty in school psychology, counselor education, and social work training programs can share highlights of their professional roles and direct undergraduates on how to learn more about their field.

Interested presenters can access videos, PowerPoint presentations, and infographics that accurately and concisely describe professions on the websites of the respective national associations such as the National Association of School Psychologists ([NASP](#)) and the American School Counselor Association ([ASCA](#)), with additional resources created for use during designated times intended to increase awareness of the profession such as the annual school social work week (School Social Work Association of America; [SSWAA](#)).

Learning more about the profession can occur through

- *follow-up dialogue with the presenter or other practitioners*
- *self-guided exploration of the websites maintained by state and national organizations that represent the profession*
- *following practitioners who describe their professional experiences in discussion boards, videos, or other posts on social media platforms*
- *seeking volunteer or employment positions in school settings*
- *pursuing relevant undergraduate coursework or extracurricular experiences at their university.*

Many colleges and universities have also created undergraduate courses that offer an opportunity for college students to learn more about careers in school mental health. Examples include courses on psychology in the schools, school social work, introduction to counseling skills, school mental health, positive psychology, school safety and crisis response, and school mental health, to name a few. Many courses include didactic instruction on the professional responsibilities of school mental health professionals, job shadowing or interviewing professionals, and/or field experiences that involve service learning, practicum or internship experiences in PK-12 school settings. Such field experiences that are facilitated through university-community partnerships have the dual benefit of furthering the undergraduate's learning and providing free supervised mental health or academic supports to youth (Wingate et al., 2020). Some universities offer a minor in applied psychology or school-based mental health to enable undergraduates to acquire a breadth of didactic, field, and research experiences that may expand their knowledge of potential careers and increase their readiness for graduate school.



## Financial Support for Graduate Education

Given the rising costs of graduate education and the need for an advanced degree to pursue most school mental health positions, graduate programs are encouraged to consider scholarships, fellowships, and other funding opportunities. This might include local partnerships with school districts where incoming students agree to fulfill a service obligation in a local school or district in exchange for financial support to complete their degree. Districts that use a grow-your-own model to recruit promising paraprofessionals into careers in school mental health can consider accessing funds available to local education agencies to train future school mental health professionals who would remain district employees upon certification. The professional literature includes detailed models of how to form such LEA-university partnerships to train more school psychologists (Schmitz et al., 2022) and social workers (Bates et al., 2022). To address the high costs of relocation, which pose barriers to access, graduate training programs can consider how to utilize technology to create online and distance learning options for working students. To reduce the tuition burden, many states are pursuing loan forgiveness programs for educators and school mental health professionals who commit to work in a high-needs school in their state following graduation.





## Recruitment in Rural Schools & Districts

School leaders in rural communities have identified a number of effective strategies for recruiting and retaining school mental health professionals (Belansky et al., 2024; O'Malley et al., 2018). This includes offering competitive, often higher salaries than neighboring districts, providing free or reduced tuition to school employees seeking graduate degrees in school mental health programs, and creating state loan forgiveness programs for graduates who commit to working in rural communities. Other strategies include flexible work arrangements, such as (a) 10-hour workdays for four days each week, (b) allowing professionals to work from home one day a week to complete evaluations, assessment reports, and virtual consultations with caregivers, and (c) extended contracts over the summer for additional pay. It can also be helpful to provide reimbursement for travel, as employees in rural communities often have a long commute between work and home.

Providing prospective and graduate students in various school mental health professions the opportunity to spend time in communities other than their own can open the door to exciting career options that some may not have previously considered. Immersion experiences are learning opportunities in which participants visit and stay in community to develop a deeper sense of life in that region (Zittleman et al., 2014). Rural schools might consider opportunities where graduate students can spend practicum and/or internship training experiences in rural communities to learn more about the local culture and context. This could include extended semester or yearlong experiences, or even week-long immersion experiences where students are exposed to working in locations they may not otherwise have exposure to.

Virtual supervision and training offer rural communities an opportunity to provide additional internship or extended training opportunities to graduate students and new professionals. Multiple models have been used to provide remote supervision and training using evidence-based practices such as ECHO in medical and education settings, through the use of interactive video technology, case-based learning, didactic training, and discussion (Arora et al., 2011; Hardesty et al., 2020). Rural schools can partner with universities to engage in similar models to best support graduate schools in training in rural communities.



# Marketing Your District or Program's Strengths to Potential Employees or Trainees

Addressing the workforce shortage requires effective communication with potential practitioners to share the advantages of careers in the school mental health fields and the daily and long-term benefits associated with a career path, graduate training program, and employment setting (Oyen et al., 2019). Setting-specific benefits range from emotional to practical. Emotional experiences at school and in the workplace matter— faculty and administrators should share the steps they take to create a positive environment that supports healthy relationships, personal well-being, and celebrates successes. It is important to consider what someone might share about their own professional experiences in a school, district, and/or university program if asked by a prospective student or employee.

Demonstrating the culture and climate of your school or university begins with impressions conveyed during the interview process. Leaders should carefully consider who is on the interview team and ensure the panel includes warm, knowledgeable individuals who reflect the values and diversity of the organization. The goal of the interview is to assess the applicant's skills and their fit between the applicant and the organization. Thus, the interview process should be collegial, respectful, and authentic. The applicant should leave with a balanced understanding of the position requirements, as well as the positive emotional and practical experiences associated with belonging to the organization, and their professional identity within the field.

Schools, districts, and universities can consider multiple strategies for showcasing the personal and professional stories of current and future school mental health professionals. This could include:

- **A day in the life video, highlighting what it's like to work and live in the current district, university, or community**
- **Video vignettes of current and former students or employees sharing professional experiences**
- **Case examples of how school mental health professionals found their current profession and/or position, and how it has impacted their life**



# Final Thoughts

Expanding the school mental health workforce requires coordinated efforts from decision-makers at each level (e.g., state, district, school, university), as well as practitioners who can be ambassadors for their profession. At the state-level, policies that make clear the desired number of school mental health providers per school, in a manner consistent with nationally-recommended ratios, help set the targets for graduate training programs to attract and districts to employ. To attract enough qualified professionals to fill those positions, trainees, practitioners, and supervisors within schools and universities can then use creative and intentional communication strategies to raise awareness of careers in school mental health among K-12 students, undergraduates, and adults in related roles in education. Providing trainees with financial, academic, and social support throughout graduate school and beyond is critical to helping aspiring practitioners complete their journey to credentialed school mental health provider. School leaders must then market and communicate the unique benefits of working in schools to move the pipeline of potential to employed practitioners.

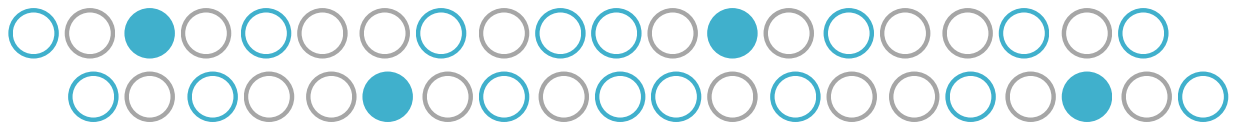


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# Discussion Guide Questions

After reviewing the above information, reflect on the following questions to deepen your learning and guide next steps in developing an action plan to build and sustain professional pipelines in your school, district, and/or university. It will be helpful to review the Practice Brief and Grantee Spotlight(s), as well as existing local efforts as you reflect on the questions. Consider discussing these questions with colleagues in a setting like professional learning communities or online discussion boards, to further expand both your individual and collective understanding.

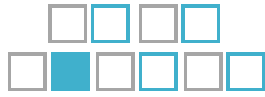
1. **What resources could be developed to best showcase current openings in your school, district, or university?**
2. **Who currently sits on your interview team? Can they clearly and accurately convey the responsibilities of the position and provide perspectives on what it is like to live and work in the local community?**
3. **For those working in rural communities and based on the above information, what strategies would like to explore in your local community?**
4. **What partnerships may be beneficial to establish or enhance in your community to harness university-district collaboration to build a pipeline?**
5. **What might be potential barriers to initiating new ideas or tasks? Who are potential colleagues or leaders in your district that can assist with prospective changes?**





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