

Promoting Student Success: Keep Psychological Services Centralized

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Education reform is a controversial topic across the nation and Nevada is not immune to such matters. During the 2015 78th legislative session AB394 passed, which resulted in the existing Plan to Reorganize the Clark County School District (CCSD) (AB394, 2015; CCSD, 2016). The Plan is an ambitious undertaking that requires extensive thought. As the fifth largest school district in the nation, CCSD serves 319,712 students and operates approximately 350 schools (CCSD, 2016). The proposed Plan to reorganize CCSD includes increasing autonomy at the school sites, increasing staff and community decision-making powers, and decreasing top-down mandates.

For the majority of licensed individuals working in the schools, this reorganization may have little impact. However, for related service professionals (school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, school nurses, etc.) and the students they serve, the impact could be tremendously harmful if logistical, legal, ethical, and financial matters are not carefully considered.

Logistical matters. Related service professionals are individuals required by state and federal laws to carry out duties specified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Nevada Administrative Code (NAC). Currently, these professionals are centrally supervised, but locally housed. For example, school psychologists, speech language pathologists, and school nurses report to their assigned school(s) for their day-to-day duties, but they are not supervised by building principals, they are supervised by licensed professionals from their designated practices.

Functionally, with approximately 350 schools, and only 169 school psychologists, there are not enough school psychologists to work at only one school. If a school psychologist were to be split between multiple schools, how would their contract be negotiated and funded? If a school psychologist were to be supervised and hired by one principal at one school, how many schools would not have one? Who would service student needs at the 181 schools without a school psychologist? There are not 181 school psychologists across the nation looking for positions and these vacancies would go unfilled.

Allocation of resources is a significant concern that reorganization planners must consider as the implementation of AB394 proceeds. Currently, the supply of related service professionals is stretched extremely thin across the United States (NCPSSERS, 2016). With approximately 350 CCSD schools requiring coverage to meet IDEA implementation and only 169 school psychologists, 318 speech language pathologists, and 180 school nurses, centralized collaborative efforts are the only way to ensure that all schools have coverage to meet all students' needs.

Legal matters. Legally, centralized collaborative efforts are the only way to ensure that all schools have coverage; if schools are not serving students with disabilities or suspected disabilities they are in violation of IDEA and NAC laws. This could bring innumerable lawsuits from parents, and could carry a significant fiscal impact under Part B, Sections 611 and 619 of IDEA (USDOE, 2016).

Ethical matters. School psychologist, speech language pathologist, and school nurse administrators are former practitioners who understand the operational requirements inherent in these related service professions. They support practitioners in their duties, ensuring that practices are uniform and meet federal, state, and local standards. This uniformity supports CCSD’s reorganization initiatives for centralized services that establish coherent expectations, allocate resources, and develop systems of support (CCSD, 2016).

School psychologists are student advocates. If school psychologists were supervised by building principals, conflicts of interest would arise. School psychologists are not directly impacted by the number of students in special education. On the other hand, building principals advocate for their school as a whole. The school psychologist who advocates on behalf of a student may face negative consequences if his/her actions do not align with the building principal’s wishes. Maintaining a centralized school psychology department assures a system of checks and balances, supports CCSD initiatives, and reduces conflicts of interest.

Financial matters. Keeping Psychological Services centralized would be fiscally advantageous for CCSD. The Plan to reorganize stipulates that Central Services shall be relegated primarily to services without elasticity. This is one way for the school district to monitor and control expenditures. Maintaining centralized services for school psychologists aligns with this initiative, as the annual percent of students in special education is relatively static. For more than a decade, the percent of Nevada’s students who receive special education supports hovers around 11% (NDE, 2016). These figures are historically stable and support a “free” versus a “school-to-pay” delivery model.

In considering a reorganization as significant as the one mandated by AB394, and with possible bill drafts in subsequent legislative sessions, it is with great hope that our leaders recognize the structures currently in place whose service delivery is already optimized.

Superintendent Skorkowsky firmly stated in his reorganization message that we must make thoughtful decisions that do “no harm” (CCSD, 2016). Eliminating a centralized department for school psychologists, speech language pathologists, and school nurses would certainly do harm to the students and families we serve.

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