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ABSTRACT

The transition from being a graduate student to a school psychologist is a complex task. Most school districts do not provide much support to new psychologists. The goal of the California Association of School Psychologists' New School Psychologist Support (NSPS) initiative is to direct resources targeted at new psychologists to facilitate a smooth transition into their careers. This article summarizes a panel presentation by a group of experienced psychologists addressing survival issues for first year psychologists, one of the first activities of the NSPS. The topics included: "Making Connections for Professional Development"; "Fitting into the School's Culture"; "Building Credibility and Developing Confidence"; and "Time Management." Common themes among the presentations were the importance of being active and not being afraid of making a mistake, consulting with others, and taking care of personal needs. (JDM)

New School Psychologist Support:
How to Avoid Crashing and Burning your First Year

Brian P. Leung, Tom Kampwirth, Rose DuMond,
Barbara Lewis-Mills, and Rene Gonzales

Abstract

Transition from being a graduate student to a school psychologist is a daunting task potentially filled with hardships and troubles. Yet most school districts do not provide much, if any, support to new psychologists. The goal of the CASP's New School Psychologist Support (NSPS) initiative recognizes this fact, and seeks to direct Association resources targeting new psychologists to facilitate a smooth transition into their career.

The article summarizes one of the first activity of the NSPS, a panel presentation by a group of veteran psychologists addressing survival issues for first year psychologists. The first topic dealt with "Making Connections for Professional Development" -- ideas to make connections within the district and with others to help keep new psychologists stay "new" in thinking. Second topics is "Fitting into the School's Culture" -- how to learn formal and informal rules so as to work well within the existing context of the school. This also helps to build trust and rapport with staff. One of the biggest challenges for the "new kids on the block" is to develop credibility with veteran teachers and parents. "Building Credibility and Developing Confidence" discusses tips and strategies to do this for new and veteran psychologists. Lastly, the ability to manage time effectively is a key ingredient for new (and veteran) psychologists to be successful. This is covered in the last topic on "Time Management". Some common themes among the presentations: Be active and not be afraid to make mistakes, consult with others, and take good personal care of yourself. All these themes are useful reminders for new, as well as veteran psychologists.

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Running Head: New School Psychologist Support

**New School Psychologist Support:
How to Avoid Crashing and Burning your First Year**

**Brian P. Leung, Tom Kampwirth, Rose DuMond,
Barbara Lewis-Mills, and Rene Gonzales**

**2001 California Association of School Psychologist
Annual Convention**

New School Psychologist Support:
How to Avoid Crashing and Burning your First Year

A panel consisting of veteran psychologists was convened at the 2001 annual convention of the California Association of School Psychologists. The purpose of the panel was to share experiences and advise on important issues facing new psychologists. This panel is one of the first activity of an initiative to explicitly support new psychologists entering the profession proposed by the first author. The initiative was adopted by the CASP Board at the December 1999 Board meeting.

The New School Psychologist Support (NSPS) initiative recognizes that the transition from a graduate student to a school psychologist is a daunting task, potentially filled with hardships and troubles. Yet most school districts do not provide much, if any, support to new psychologists. The goal of the NSPS initiative is to direct Association resources targeting new psychologists to facilitate a smooth transition into their career.

The panel was chosen to represent different perspectives of psychological service delivery in schools. Dr. Tom Kampwirth is a university trainer, Rose DuMond is a psychologist at the high school level, Barbara Lewis Mills serves elementary schools, and Rene Gonzales is the director of psychological services for Los Angeles U.S.D., the second largest school district in the country. The first author selected the topics, with input from panel members, as well as acted as moderator at the panel presentation.

The first topic dealt with "Making Connections for Professional Development". Once a psychologist is out of graduate school, many find it difficult to keep abreast of new information and practices. Professional development is critical so one is not working on old premises and research. Tom presents many ideas to make connections within the district and with others to help keep new psychologists stay "new" in thinking. To be successful, new psychologists must initially work well within the existing context of the school. This helps to build trust and rapport with staff. Rose discussed issues related to "Fitting into the School's Culture" and about formal and informal rules. One of the biggest challenges for the "new kids on the block", especially if the new kid is also young in age, is to develop credibility with veteran teachers and parents. Along this line, confidence becomes both a mediating force and an end product. Barbara offered many tips in "Building Credibility and Developing Confidence". Lastly, the ability to manage time effectively is a key ingredient for new (and veteran) psychologists to be successful. It is no surprise that many psychologists have trouble with this aspect of their professional life because school psychology is a "high-profile" profession. Knowing how to deal with constant demands on our time, and making the needed personal changes will help you not only for your first years as a psychologist, but for the rest of your career. Rene shares some practical and useful tips on this important topic. The reader will discover some common themes among the presentations: Be active and not be afraid to make mistakes, consult with others, and take good personal care of yourself. All these themes are useful reminders for new, as well as veteran psychologists.

- You get the *School Psychology Review*, which in my opinion, is the best journal in the field of school psychology quarterly).
- As with CASP membership, you get a reduced fee for the convention, which is 10 times bigger than CASP.

✓ At the international level: ISPA

The International School Psychologists Association is dedicated to bringing information and understanding across international boundaries. They have a convention every summer (a tax-deductible method for international travel). Check it out.

Anyone else to connect with?

- ✓ Your graduate school peers. Keep the bonds that were developed during your university studies. Get addresses before people disappear into the work world.
- ✓ Former professors. Give us a call. We specialize in low cost advice.

Fitting into the School's Culture

You get your assignment, supplies, test kits; you're ready to go. You step onto campus and don't be too surprised if no one has time to talk to you. So...

Where You Fit In

- ✓ Make an appointment before hand to let them know you are coming.
- ✓ Ask for very specific things- schedule, key to an office, where to find the RSP or department head.
- ✓ Start small! Get to know the people you will naturally be working with the most (e.g., special education teachers, administrators).
- ✓ Then, branch out and meet others. Have the ones you know introduce you.
- ✓ Getting to know people, getting people to know you.
 - Be visible.
 - Introduce yourself.
 - Attend staff meetings.
 - Make announcements and presentations.
 - Observations in classrooms and interview teachers.
- ✓ At middle school or high school, you can spread yourself around on 1 kid.
- ✓ This whole scenario happens whether you are brand new, a first year, or a veteran moving to a new school or district.

Formal and Informal Rules

- ✓ Formal rules are the known structure, the rules you can find on paper or are specifically told. These are easy and they include:
 - Schedules
 - Assignments

This article summarizes the key points presented by each panel members. Details about the New Psychology Support Initiative may be obtained by contacting the CASP office in Sacramento, CA.

Making Connections for Professional Development

Why connections are important

- ✓ For professional purposes
 - To find out about your district philosophy, policies and practices;
 - To discover who knows about various subparts of your responsibilities;
 - Let others know about you, your needs/interests as an entry-level professional.
- ✓ For interpersonal relationship purposes
 - Many people are gregarious and will want to establish contact with you, their new colleague. Most will empathize with you being the new kid on the block.
 - Many people will tell you that what they like (or don't like) about their jobs isn't so much the work, as it is the people they deal with.

How does one make connections?

- ✓ Be eager, organized and assertive
- ✓ Give the immediate impression that you are looking forward to working with your associates (peers, supervisors, secretaries).
- ✓ Have a specific agenda. Think forward to the information you want in order to do your job well and then find the people who can answer your questions.
- ✓ Remember that most people in the helping professions such as school psychology are naturally inclined toward assisting others.
- ✓ Indicate that you would "...really appreciate their help in understanding some of the 3 p's (see above).
- ✓ Your district may have a formal mentoring system. Get what you can from this, but don't let that be all you do to help yourself.

After you've mastered the district connections, what else is there?

- ✓ Local area: Most areas have a local CASP affiliate association.
 - What is it in your location?
 - What are they doing? Remember, "they" can be "you." Be a joiner; be a doer.
 - Meet people from other districts and see how they are solving mutual problems.
- ✓ Statewide: CASP
 - Join now, get 15 months for the price of 12 (See convention registration packet).
 - You get CASP Today and the California School Psychologist journal.
- ✓ At the national level: NASP
 - You get the *Communiqué*, a jam-packed newsletter that is excellent (8x a year).

- Hierarchy (chain of command)
 - Special education laws and regulations, timelines, procedures
 - Standards and Curriculum
- ✓ Informal rules are all the other stuff no one tells you about. You find out over time as you figure out the culture and begin to fit in. These are learned mostly through observations and connections. These rules are about how to do your job efficiently and effectively; who knows what; how to get the info you need, etc.

Examples:

Where the staff room is Where you really eat

Who does the filing You do the filing

The chain of command Who really has the power to make decisions

Building Credibility and Developing Confidence

Whether you're an intern, a new school psychologist, or are moving to a new school site or district, building credibility and confidence is a work that is always in progress. As a matter of fact, building and maintaining credibility is something that all school psychologists should think about on a regular basis.

Some "truisms" to start with...

- ✓ The secretary/office manager and the custodian at your schools DO run everything. Be nice to them and get them to like you...everything will run much smoother.
- ✓ Always make sure to have a plan B, and plan D or E. Always have a back-up plan in case of illnesses, assemblies or fieldtrips.
- ✓ Remember, the likelihood that something weird will happen is directly related to the urgency with which you have to get something else done!
- ✓ There will be days when ABSOLUTELY NOTHING weird happens! This doesn't happen often, but when it does, enjoy it and use that time to get a little less behind.
- ✓ Always wear shoes that allow you to move quickly. Be practical. You never know when you may have to chase someone!

Getting along with teachers

- ✓ Write a note to the teachers introducing yourself along with some areas of interest.
- ✓ Ask for a time to visit each classroom to get acquainted with them and vice versa.
- ✓ Get into classrooms early in the year. Don't be afraid to get involved in class activities and not just watch from a corner. If in doubt, ask the teacher.
- ✓ Try to set aside time to observe in classrooms on a regular basis, (e.g., a couple of hours every other week or so). Don't commit to a specific time because something might come up. Let teachers if you have to make a change.
- ✓ Teachers will stop you in the hall and ask you questions. Talk to them, but then always ask them to write you a brief note about the topic/conversation to help you follow through with their request.

- ✓ If you don't know an answer, admit it. It's a lot better to say that you don't know, but you'll find out and get back to someone, than it is to give misinformation.
- ✓ Let teachers know when you have to put off something. If something comes up (and it will!), let staff know that you'll be back to it as soon as you are able.
- ✓ Talk to teachers about what you're finding in your assessment, especially important if your results are different from a teacher's perspective. (This goes for parents too.)
- ✓ Try to catch teachers at a relatively relaxed time to talk. (FYI: dismissal time, yard duty, and in the middle of a lesson are NOT those times—unless that's when the teacher approaches you!)

About Meetings....

- ✓ Be yourself or at least find a style that you feel comfortable with. Learn some new style of interactions, and don't try to be something you're not.
- ✓ Avoid acronyms or technical terminology because they can distance you from people. Don't "talk down;" just talk in terms that others can understand. Check for understanding, and watch for a telltale "glazed over" look.

With Parents....

- ✓ Talk to parents as much as you can before you have your IEP. If you really feel uncomfortable, take someone with you on a home visit or have someone sit in when you're talking to them on the phone.
- ✓ When you call parents, emphasize that you're from the school, rather than that you're the school psychologist. Our title often puts people on the defensive, so emphasize *what you do* rather than *your title*.

When It Gets Uncomfortable....

- ✓ A day will probably come when you come across someone that will dislike or challenge you just because you're a school psychologist. When this happens, don't take it personally...it's just comes with the "territory."
- ✓ If a parent, teacher or advocate becomes verbally aggressive towards you during a meeting, refocus everyone of the purpose of your meeting to get back on track.
- ✓ If that doesn't work, it's really ok to say that you think the meeting needs to be adjourned and reconvened at a later date.

Remember to Take Care of Yourself!

- ✓ Make sure you do something for yourself. Don't be a psych 24 hours a day. Do something you enjoy on a regular basis to help you relieve stress.
- ✓ Don't take yourself too seriously. Find something to laugh about everyday. Cultivate silliness. DO something. Otherwise you'll burn out way too fast.
- ✓ Find someone you can talk to.... a colleague, a senior psych, your former supervisor, or someone else you respect. It's always a good idea to bounce ideas off of others.

- ✓ You will likely doubt yourself at some point, and you will wonder why you got yourself into this. Don't worry about it, that's normal.
- ✓ Don't expect to be perfect and know everything. Learn from mistakes, and then think about the times that things worked, rather than when they didn't.
- ✓ You will occasionally receive thank you notes. KEEP THEM!
- ✓ Remember that you're there to be part of the solution. Very few people can do what you do. You've received special training and you're a special resource. Be proud of who you are and what you do!

Time Management: How to Take Control of Seemingly Uncontrollable Events

The Challenge here is threefold: How do juggle all the demands of the public education bureaucracy? How do eliminate or reduce those time robbing events? What do I personally need to change to be more effective?

The Key to Managing Time

- ✓ The ability to control events
- ✓ Often people think they either have no control or they have total control
- ✓ In most cases the truth is somewhere in between

The Key to Gaining Control Is

- ✓ Planning, Planning, Planning! Any time you can plan ahead, it will save you that much time.
- ✓ Be careful of common excuses people use to not plan, such as:
 - There's no time to plan
 - It limits my freedom
 - It makes me inflexible
 - You might like the buzz of tight deadlines or crisis

Suggestions for Survival

- ✓ Taking time on something now may save time later.
- ✓ Work on those things that you can do quickly but pay big dividends Something can be done quickly (e.g. a clarifying comment) to avoid further problems or misunderstanding.
- ✓ Break up a big task into smaller parts. It's helpful pragmatically and emotionally.
- ✓ Give yourself due dates. Most people work better this way.
- ✓ Plan for the unexpected.
- ✓ Don't book yourself so tight that the unexpected throws everything off. Give yourself a few extra minutes for each scheduled event.
- ✓ Include goals or tasks that are also rewarding. Find what you enjoy doing and work to get more of those activities.
- ✓ Prioritize your activities...can't do everything first!
- ✓ Make use of technology

- E-mail
- Data bases
- ✓ Identify you time robbers
 - Meetings (especially unnecessary ones)
 - Procrastination
 - Poor Communication (not being clear what mean)
 - Interruptions
 - Socializing

Controlling Interruptions

When someone interrupts you in the middle of something, consider the following comments:

- ✓ Let me research this and I'll get back to you
- ✓ What is your time line on this task?
- ✓ How can I help you? (refocus and direct a conversation)
- ✓ Stand up during the conversation.
- ✓ Can we meet later to day to discuss this?

Remember!

- ✓ In spite of all your planning and organization, there are just going to be some bad days.
- ✓ There is always going to be more to do then time in a day.
- ✓ Take some time to smell the roses.



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