

## ***Bringing training to rural districts: Practitioners feedback on graduate preparation***

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### **Purpose**

This survey was created to provide complimentary data to the Prairie Nebraska Project, a grant submission aiming to help address the current shortage of school mental health personnel in rural Nebraska. This survey was created by graduate student researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, advised by Dr. Beth Doll, in order to assess the training and work experiences of rural school psychologists and school counselors. This report discusses the significant information collected by the survey and how graduate training programs can adapt their programming to prepare students for work in rural school districts.

### **Methods and Data Analysis**

Participants were recruited from school psychologists and school counselors working for Educational Service Units (ESU) in rural Nebraska. Twenty-eight school psychologists and fourteen school mental health counselors participated in the survey. The ESUs represented in the data set are those located at least 25 miles outside of Nebraska's two urban centers: Lincoln and Omaha.

A Qualtrics survey consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions asked about practitioners' perceptions of their graduate training, their insight on how to adapt graduate programs for candidates who will work in rural communities, and their description of their work environment(s). A first draft of the survey was reviewed by four rural school mental health practitioners who consulted on its structure and validity. With their guidance, the survey was adapted and distributed via email to each rural ESU; subsequently, snowball sampling was used to recruit additional respondents.

Results from the survey are analyzed using a mixed-method design. The quantitative data collected by the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify common characteristics among participants. Survey results were analyzed using thematic coding to identify key themes in participant responses. Three raters were used to identify themes from the survey results. Themes were identified when two or more raters agreed that a theme was present. Overall inter-rater agreement was 81%.

## **Results**

### **Experiences of a Rural School Psychologist or Counselor**

Working as a school psychologist or counselor in a rural school and/or district presents an experience that is unique in many ways from the experiences of urban or metropolitan practitioners. This survey asked respondents about aspects of their daily work life that are unique to rural areas and how graduate training programs can better prepare students for future work in rural areas. Participants' responses highlighted several common themes which were then organized to represent the challenges and advantages of those who work in rural districts.

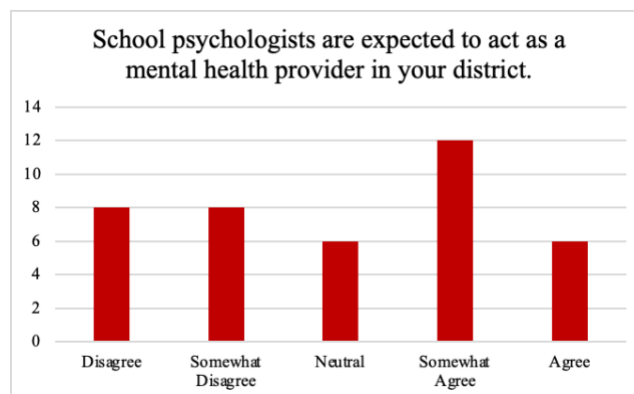
#### **Challenges:**

Participants were asked to describe some of the challenges they face that are unique to their job as a school psychologist or school counselor. They were also asked to describe skills that are especially important to those who work in rural school districts that were not emphasized in their graduate training programs.

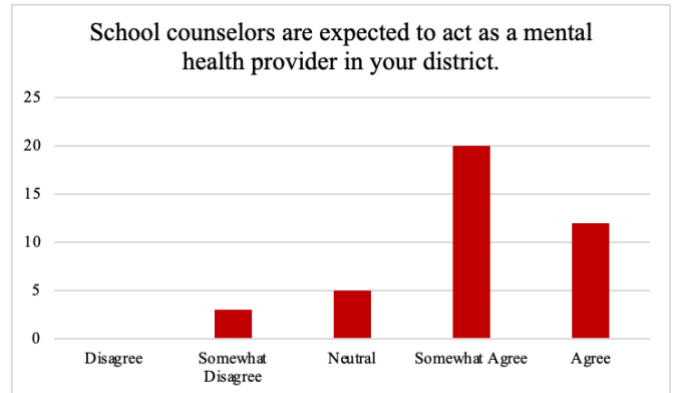
#### **Limited Community Resources**

Outside of the resources provided by the school, there are few community-based mental health resources for students and their families to access. By not being able to refer students for outside services, school psychologists and school counselors are tasked with exhausting school-based resources which may not adequately meet the needs of every student. Rural school mental health personnel expressed that they often felt as if they were taking on an additional burden by attempting to connect students to appropriate resources while performing the responsibilities of their job.

Due to limited resources among rural communities, respondents were asked to describe their role as mental health providers in their district. School psychologists presented mixed results, 15% agreed, 30% somewhat agreed, 15% were neutral, 20% somewhat disagreed, and 20% disagreed.



When school counselors were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement, “In your district, school counselors are expected to act as a mental health provider,” 30% agreed, 50% somewhat agreed, 12.5% were neutral, 7.5% somewhat disagreed, and 0% disagreed. This question highlights some of the additional responsibilities that school psychologists and school counselors may face due to limited community resources.



### **Inaccessible Community Resources**

When community resources are available, there are additional obstacles when trying to access them. Respondents often noted that transportation to and from services is a challenge, particularly where there is little to no public transportation and great distances between families and mental health resources. Cost and limited time also serve as barriers that prevent families from accessing services.

*“Mental health resources are not only scarce in rural communities, but getting parents to take their kids to therapy is extremely hard. Most of the reasons students don't get services when left to parents is transportation, cost, and time.”*

In addition to logistical obstacles, increased wait times served as a barrier preventing students from accessing external resources. When a high volume of need is met with scarce options for services, the wait time for student to be able to access available resources becomes long. Before starting as a rural school practitioner, one respondent commented that:

*“I didn't fully understand the wait time for students to receive services.”*

### **Limited Range of School Resources**

Within the school itself, there are limits to the care that can be given. An internal lack of resources contributed to different factors depending on the district/respondent, but a few recurring reasons included lack of personnel to implement interventions, lack of monetary funding, and lack of time to implement services. The services lacking tended to be more individualized or specific types of care, such as Tier 3 interventions. This may prevent students with higher needs from accessing services within the building, as well as place undue burden on school psychologists and school counselors trying to meet those needs.

*“We do not have as large of a population as Omaha for example. So Tier 2 or Tier 3 programs that could be beneficial for students aren't offered due to staffing or funding.”*

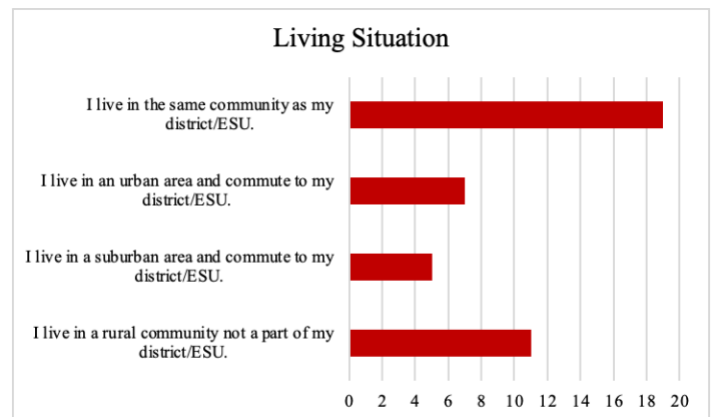
## Difficulty Maintaining Confidentiality

In rural communities, the likelihood of having to manage a dual relationship is very likely. A dual relationship is when school personnel may have an additional connection to a child via community involvement. Since there is a smaller population in rural areas, it becomes probable that a member of the community may be privy to additional information about a child that extends beyond a school psychologist or school counselor's area of practice. Keeping boundaries and maintaining confidentiality across groups becomes increasingly challenging when living in such an interconnected community.

One respondent offered that they wished they had additional preparation from their graduate training regarding the complexity of relationships in rural communities.

*“How to work with and understand individuals that serve multiple roles (e.g. in one of my districts the HS Spanish teacher is also the Elementary Counselor).”*

When asked to describe their living situation, 45% of respondents stated that they lived in the same community as their district/Educational Service Unit. Twenty six percent of respondents said that they live in a rural community that is not covered by their district/ESU. School mental health personnel that live in the community they serve may have an especially hard time managing dual relationships.



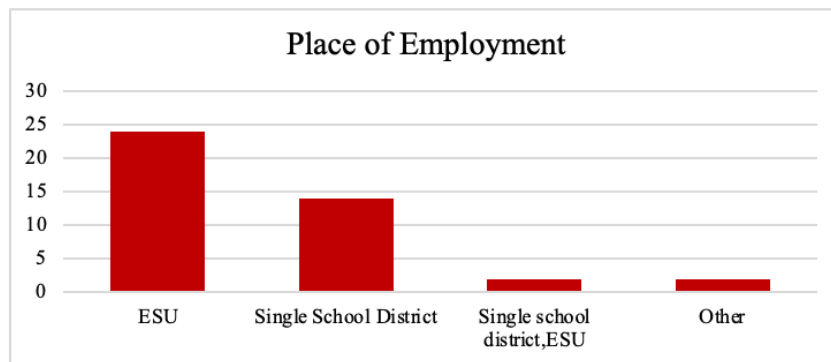
## School Assignment Limits Availability

When working for a rural district or ESU, school mental health personnel may be assigned to multiple schools and facilities. Managing multiple sites severely limits the amount of time school psychologists and school counselors have available for each school. Having to travel across multiple sites also makes it harder to form strong working relationships with students and school staff. Several respondents commented on how they wanted to provide more services at a particular location but did not have the time to do so. Based on their limited availability some school mental health personnel act more as consultants.

*“I have limited time (1-2 days/week) in each of my districts, which makes building relationships and the change process slow. Some days require a lot of driving, which can be challenging with young kids at home trying to navigate after school meetings, an hour of driving, and childcare pick up for my own kids.”*

*“Since I am not there full time at my schools, sometimes all I can do is give my professional opinion, but in the end, it is the school who gets to make the final decision on certain things. Sometimes that can be a difficult pill to swallow, especially since your opinion/thoughts/ideas/recommendations might align more closely with best practices.”*

When asked where participants work in rural areas, 59% stated that they work for an Educational Service Unit (ESU). ESUs serve as educational agencies that provide services to multiple schools and school districts. When employed by an ESU, school personnel are often required to serve a specific number of schools or districts covered by their service area. Depending on the staffing levels of a given ESU, school psychologists and school counselors may have limited time available for each of their service locations.



### **High Student to Staff Caseload**

When serving multiple schools, the number of students that a school psychologist or school counselor may serve can reach extreme levels. By serving a high caseload, school mental health personnel may not be able to provide the necessary time and resources to meet each student’s needs.

*“430:1 student to counselor ratio. I’m not just a “School Counselor,” it’s a lot more than the job title leads you to believe”*

### **Travel and Associated Costs**

Many respondents stated that traveling to multiple sites was a challenge unique to serving in a rural area. Many echoed similar sentiments about the time it takes them to travel to their assigned sites and the accompanying mileage. Some were offered reimbursement for mileage or travel time, but that is not offered to all rural school mental health personnel.

When asked about a unique challenge to working as a school psychologist/ counselor, one respondent commented about:

*“Commuting .... often extended distances, w/o reimbursement---raising gas prices...the danger of commuting... the wear and tear on your vehicle...”*

## **Advantages:**

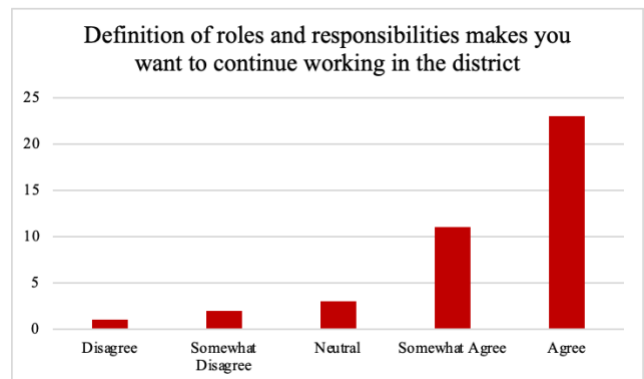
Participants were also asked to describe the advantages that would attract a beginning school psychologist or school counselor to work in a rural community. While respondents provided many great examples, two themes were identified.

### **Role Versatility**

Multiple respondents described the variation in their day-to-day role. Some felt this was an advantage, allowing them to tailor their role as school mental health personnel to meet the needs of their school or their personal interests. The variety of their role and the ability to adapt or expand their presence in schools led some school practitioners to feel they created an environment for growth and a dynamic, engaging work life.

*“There are many opportunities for growth in rural districts for School Psychologists. You would be someone with the most expertise in the district on a number of topics, from mental health to MTSS and systems-level change. You have the opportunity to shape your role in small districts and expand your role beyond some traditional tasks because rural districts take an ‘all hands on deck’ approach to meeting needs.”*

When asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “Your district’s definition of your roles and responsibilities makes you want to continue working in the district,” 57.5% agreed, 27.5% somewhat agreed, 7.5% were neutral, 5% somewhat disagreed, and 2.5% disagreed.



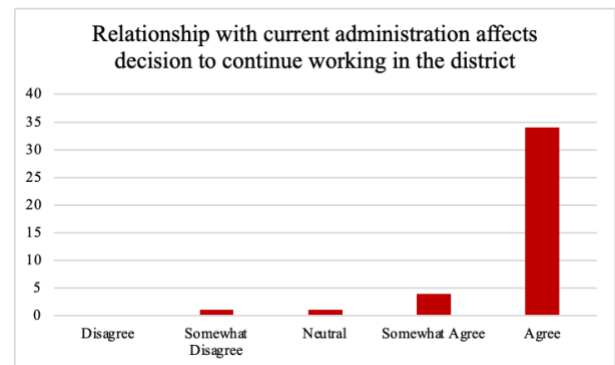
### **Building Meaningful Relationships**

As discussed in the previous section, rural communities develop an interconnectedness amongst themselves that is unique from metropolitan areas. While some struggled to balance confidentiality and dual relationships, others found the close-knit community to be a source of enjoyment. This was particularly pertinent when strong, positive relationships transferred across school and community lines. The connection with the outside community, and the way these connections were built into the schools, was a common source of personal fulfillment for respondents.

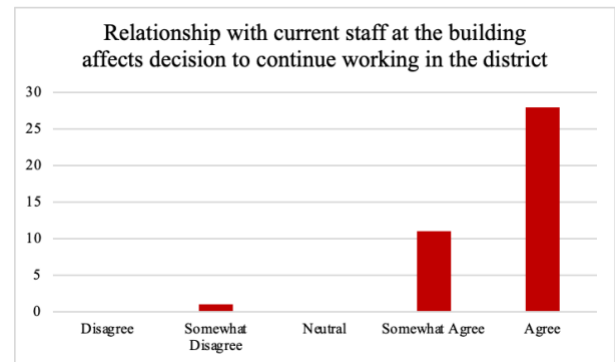
*“The opportunity to develop relationships with students and watch them grow and develop as they go through school is an advantage not offered in metropolitan locations. Rural communities show up for people during difficult times and can offer flexibility as students move through challenging life situations.”*

*“The fact that almost everyone knows each other. It's like being a part of a larger family. You have the opportunity to get involved in the communities outside of being a counselor or psychologist.”*

When asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “Your relationship with current administration at your building(s) affects your decision to continue working in the district,” 85% agreed, 10% somewhat agreed, 2.5% were neutral, 2.5% somewhat disagreed, and 0% disagreed.



When asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “Your relationship with current teachers/staff at your building affects your decision to continue working in the district,” 70% agreed, 27.5% somewhat agreed, 0% were neutral, 2.5% somewhat disagreed, and 0% disagreed.



## **Implications for Graduate Training Programs**

Based on the results identified by quantitative and qualitative analysis, researchers concluded there are five primary implications for graduate training programs looking to provide training to rural mental health providers.

First, graduate training programs should prepare graduate students to navigate high student caseloads. High student to psychologist or counselor ratios as well as assignment to multiple sites create heavy workloads for school mental health providers. A high caseload of students hinders the time a school psychologist or counselor may work individually with students on interventions. Graduate training programs can prepare graduate students by facilitating organizational skills, introducing the use of timelines, emphasizing accurate notetaking, and providing repeated practice with multiple case examples.

Since many rural school psychologists and counselors live in the community in which they work, dual relationships are likely to arise. Graduate programs can help graduate students learn how to navigate those dual relationships in order to successfully maintain confidentiality and professionalism. Increased awareness of legal and ethical standards with direct application to rural communities may be beneficial for future rural school psychologists and counselors. Additionally, graduate training programs can foster problem solving and collaboration skills to help negotiate dual relationships in small, close-knit communities.

A graduate training program should prepare graduate students for limited school and community resources. Rural districts may have fewer available intervention resources as a school in an urban school. Additionally, rural towns have fewer resources available to families in addition to obstacles such as cost or transportation. A graduate training program can teach skills such as resourcefulness and advocacy for mental health providers who do not have access to resources. Additionally, graduate programs can introduce trainees to free resources that can be accessed within the school.

Graduate training programs should work to establish partnerships with rural school districts and Educational Service Units (ESU). According to the survey, 85% of respondents attended universities that were not located in either of Nebraska's metropolitan centers. Universities located in rural communities may be more equipped to develop relationships with local school districts, allowing students to be exposed to rural schools before they begin working. Graduate training programs should work to establish professional relationships with rural school districts in order to provide students with the necessary exposure prior to beginning their career.

Graduate training programs should increase students' exposure to working in rural schools and communities. Both school psychology and school counseling students have practicum experiences, requiring them to work in a school prior to completing their education. Graduate programs should work to provide students with opportunities to complete these requirements at rural schools so students can be exposed to rural culture, as well as gain a firsthand view as to how their role may look compared to urban districts.