

# A Survey of School Psychology Manpower Characteristics and Needs in Rural and Urban Tennessee<sup>1</sup>

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School administrators in both rural and urban districts were surveyed to determine their level of psychological services at the time of the study (1977-1978), as well as their immediate additional and future (1982-1983) manpower needs. Information regarding availability of positions and appropriate training was also gathered. Though services were reportedly available to nearly all districts, substantial immediate additional services were reported as needed. Such need, however, was highly discrepant with reported job availability. Characteristic differences between rural and urban districts are presented along with concern for an oversupply of school psychologists in the near future.

In recent years several studies have attempted to derive information related to manpower concerns in school psychological services. Three important studies have been those of Farling and Hoedt [5], Kicklighter [8], and Brown and Lindstrom [1]. These authors contributed information on manpower based on data obtained from school psychologists, state departments of education, and university training programs. The present investigation sought to provide manpower information based on the responses of school administrative personnel in the state of Tennessee. Administrator opinions were considered important since these individuals strongly influence the hiring of school psychologists. While sampling was limited to Tennessee school districts, the data may have relevance to broader manpower considerations, particularly in the southeast.

## Methodology

A fifteen-item survey was mailed to the superintendent of each of the 147 Tennessee school districts. All data were gathered between November, 1977 and March, 1978. The data were analyzed according to district size within rural and urban subdivisions as well as for all districts combined. Rural districts were divided into those of less than 1000 students, 1000-5000 students, and 5000-10,000 students. Urban districts were divided into those of 10,000-15,000, 15,000-20,000, and more than 20,000 students. Data for certain items not directly related to manpower needs have been omitted from the present discussion.

## Survey Results and Discussion

Questionnaires were returned from 122 (83%) districts, of which 108 were classified as rural and 14 as urban. Respondents were overwhelmingly persons in administrative positions (98% of the responders were identified as superintendents, assistant superintendents, supervisors, etc.).

All but one district (99%) indicated the availability of some type of psychological services. When requested to indicate the arrangement under which services were obtained, wide variation existed among rural districts. Of the 108 rural districts responding, 68% indicated the use of part-time psychologists serving that district and one or more other districts, and/or part-time services through a community mental health agency. Only 22 rural districts (20%) indicated the presence of full-time psychology services. By contrast, of the 13 urban districts responding, 9 (69%) indicated the presence of full-time personnel, and fewer alternatives for obtaining services were indicated. Only 25% of all districts reporting indicated the presence of full-time school psychological staff.

When asked to indicate if psychological services were obtained from certified, licensed, or some combination, personnel, responses indicated that both rural and urban districts obtain services through a mixture of certified and/or licensed personnel, with greater variation observed in rural districts. Greater availability of certified personnel was observed as district size increased. Approximately 13% of the respondents indicated they were receiving some psychological services from other than certified and/or licensed personnel, most often via supervised psychological interns.

Information was requested regarding the quantity of psychological services available at the time of the study (1977-1978), the additional quantity needed at that time, and the estimated quantity of services needed for the 1982-1983 school year. Responses suggested a trend in rural districts for the presence of full-time psychologists only as district size exceeded 1000 students and usually only in the largest rural districts. This trend was also seen in urban districts. Recognizing that part-time psychological services to rural areas are the rule rather than the exception, it was, nevertheless, surprising to find that nearly three-fourths (74%) of rural districts obtained services equivalent to 3 days or less per week and that 39% obtained one day per week or less! Since the vast majority of such rural systems are county-wide, psychological

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services tend to be spread extremely thin.

When asked to indicate the adequacy or inadequacy of the quantity of psychological services at the time of the study (1977-1978), numerous rural and urban administrators perceived their amount of services as inadequate (44% and 77% respectively). Of those responding as having inadequate services, a perceived immediate additional average need for 0.72 and 5.72 psychologists was indicated in rural and urban districts respectively. That is, rural districts indicated needing a total of 31.3 additional full-time equivalents (FTEs) to meet needs and urban districts indicated needing 51.5 additional full-time equivalents. Such additional need represented 55% of the total reported FTEs in rural districts and 53% of the total reported FTEs in urban districts. For whatever reasons (perhaps the growing impact of PL 94-142) both rural and urban administrators indicated they needed at least half again as many FTEs in order to meet their present demands for psychological services.

One would expect, therefore, that when indicating their total needs five years hence (1982-1983), administrators would predict a substantial increase in FTE positions. However, this did not occur. Average predicted needs of only 0.98 FTEs per rural district and 14.13 FTEs per urban district were reported. These predictions, when compared to the January, 1978 "actual" and "additional needed" FTEs, were small (see Table 1). It appears that in both rural and urban districts respondents were indicating that, should their 1977-1978 needs be met, they would be willing to live with the situation for at least five years. It may also suggest a heightened administrative sensitivity to problems in the short-run, as opposed to those in the long-run. Predictions for 1982-1983 reflected growth toward the need for at least one FTE or more, especially in the larger rural districts. Rural districts of less than 1000 students seemed to perceive their needs for psychological services as small (generally one day per week or less) both at the time of the study and five years hence. Of all the districts reporting, districts of less than 1000 students had the largest percentage of administrators responding that their services at the time of the study were adequate to meet the needs of children in their districts (75%).

Based on districts reporting, it can be estimated that the 1977-1978 total FTEs for all districts was approximately 200, and the additional need for all districts approximately 100. A ceiling of approximately 300 full-time

equivalent psychologists would appear to satisfy the need as judged by administrators. However, since most rural districts employ part-time psychological personnel, the actual number of persons providing such services would probably exceed the number of full-time equivalents mentioned. Further estimating based on public school enrollments suggest that the above figures would result in a psychologist-to-children ratio of approximately 1:4,200, reducing to 1:3,200, a still undesirable ratio based on national guidelines. The fact that most rural districts are county-wide adds a highly important variable of square miles of territory to be covered. Hence, in many rural areas, the quality of services may be decreased by a high professional: pupil ratio, as well as simply a function of excessive travel among service centers.

Data was also obtained related to job vacancies at the time of the study (1977-1978) and for the following school year (1978-1979). With all 122 districts reporting, only 10% of rural districts and 15% of urban districts indicated the presence of vacancies at the time of the study. Moreover, anticipated vacancies for the school year 1978-1979 were predicted by only 20% of rural and 25% of urban districts. In terms of rural and urban districts combined, approximately 11% indicated vacancies at present and 20% predicted vacancies for the 1978-1979 school year. These represent only 13 and 24 districts, respectively. Assuming that all had interest in hiring one FTE, the total of positions available (37) represented only 71% of the number of school psychology graduates (52) predicted for September, 1978 by training program coordinators in Tennessee [3]. That is, enough program graduates were predicted by September, 1978 to fill all anticipated job vacancies with a surplus of at least 15 graduates. While it is possible that urban vacancies were meant to indicate that more than one FTE was being sought or anticipated, responses to previous items clearly suggest that the rural data probably implied much less than one FTE. Hence, the total of 37 vacancies may be very generous the predicted surplus somewhat conservative. Since the same survey [3] predicted 52 new students would be on intership in the 1978-1979 school year and that 75 new students would be admitted to programs, the potential for oversupply in the not too distant future is a serious consideration. Retirements, continued education, movement out of state, private practice and other variables on which no data were available could offset this apparent oversupply. Beyond these train-

**Table 1**  
School Administrator's Indications of Present and Projected Need  
for School Psychological Services\*

	Present Services January, 1978 (n = 105)	Present Additional Need January, 1978 (n = 52)	Projected Need 1982-1983 (n = 116)
Rural	.62	.72	.98
Urban	8.10	5.72	14.13

\*Data are expressed as mean full time equivalents (FTEs)

**Table 2**

Summary Data of School Administrators' Indications of the Appropriate Entry-Level of Training for School Psychologists

Entry Levels	Rural Percent (n = 104)	Urban Percent (n = 13)	Total Percent (n = 117)
Bachelors Degree Plus Certain Graduate Courses	13	0	12
Masters Degree	49	30	47
Sixth Year/ Specialist Degree	24	54	27
Doctoral Degree	12	8	11
Other	2	8	3
	100	100	100

ing implications, perhaps the most discouraging aspects of these data was the large discrepancy between the percent of districts perceiving their present services as inadequate and the percent indicating vacancies. Despite the perceived need for services, the commitment to hire psychologists did not appear to be present. If misjudgments are involved that would change the data it seems more likely that the need has been underestimated (at least as school psychologists would perceive it to be) and not the availability of positions! It appears that school administrators were indicating that the need was there but the funding or commitment to use it was not.

Respondents were also asked to indicate what level of training in school psychology was necessary to provide the services needs in their districts (see Table 2). The most obvious differences was for rural districts to perceive the entry level as lower in general than that reported by urban districts. Thirty-eight percent of all districts reporting specified the necessary entry level as beyond the Masters degree. Of additional interest was the 12% of districts (all rural and generally of 5000 students or less) indicating the Bachelors degree with certain graduate courses as the appropriate level. This latter finding probably reflects the limited role perception of school psychologists (as largely psychometric in nature) in some rural areas.

In response to a separate question, administrators indicated a definite preference for persons whose training has been specifically in school psychology, from a university preparation program approved by the State Department of Education. The preference appeared in both rural (91%) and urban (92%) districts.

### Conclusions

The manpower data gathered in the present study clarify some of the major differences between psychological services in rural and urban school districts in Ten-

nessee. As a general rule, rural districts are characterized by part-time psychological services, usually less than three days per week, spread thinly over the entire county and obtained through a variety of contractual arrangements. The person serving the district is usually not a district employee, is often a private practitioner or an employee of another public or private agency contracting with the district, and is probably licensed as either a psychologist or psychological examiner in addition to any certification that may be held. In contrast, urban districts are characterized by the presence of one or more full-time personnel, who usually are district employees, and who hold certification in addition to any license held.

General agreement between rural and urban districts is observed in some areas. Administrators agreed they needed considerably more service at the time of the study but went on to indicate comparatively few additional immediate positions available to meet that need. Also, both rural and urban projected manpower needs five years post-study (1982-1983) were not much greater than the needs at the time of the study. Both rural and urban districts preferred a professional entry level of preparation at the Masters degree or greater, as well as graduation from a school psychology program approved by the State Department of Education. When compared to data obtained from a separate survey of training programs, the administrators' (both rural and urban) available positions and projected needs suggest a potential problem of oversupply from training programs.

Several aspects of the data find support in studies reported from other regions of the country. The generally sparse nature of psychological services in rural school districts is not limited to Tennessee. They have been previously observed in research surveys in the North Central region, i.e.: Illinois [4] and in the Southwest, i.e.: Oklahoma [2]. Also, the suspected narrower perception of the school psychologists role in many rural Tennessee school districts has been observed from a broader survey of school psychologists themselves [9]. It should be noted, however, that somewhat contrasting and more diverse role perceptions have been observed in a study conducted of Virginia school psychologists [7].

As suggested in the discussion above, at least one implication of PL 94-142 to both rural and urban districts has been the heightened demand for psychological services in the late 1970s. At least where rural districts are concerned, there is national survey evidence that districts have substantially increased their quantity of psychological services in response to this legislation for the handicapped [6]. The extent to which rural and urban Tennessee districts have responded to their previously perceived needs is the focus of a current investigation being conducted by the authors.

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