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Counseling 101 Column

Psychological Evaluations: What Every Principal Should Know

Sometimes student psychological evaluations are necessary and appropriate-and sometimes they are not. Here's help in knowing how and when to conduct them.

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Psychological evaluations conducted by school-based or community professionals can be invaluable tools in understanding and addressing the learning needs of individual students. When conducted, interpreted, and reported in a manner that accurately and fairly describes student needs, such evaluations can positively affect a student's educational career. Sometimes, however, evaluations are conducted for the wrong reasons, with inappropriate methods, and with little regard for how the results will be used by parents and school personnel. Reports of such evaluations often end up in a file drawer, having provided little or no information to assist school personnel. Even competent psychological evaluations, if ignored or misunderstood, can lead to serious discord between parents and school personnel and result in inappropriate or inadequate supports for student learning or behavior.

The process of obtaining and interpreting psychological evaluations is usually the responsibility of the school psychologist and special education team, but principals are often involved in discussions regarding these evaluations and what the results may mean for a student's educational services. An evaluation's usefulness is greatly enhanced when administrators understand the purpose, strengths, and limitations of the various procedures and hold realistic expectations for the value of results.

What Is a Psychological Evaluation?

A psychological evaluation is a set of assessment procedures administered by a licensed psychologist or credentialed school psychologist to obtain information about a student's learning, behavior, or mental health. Evaluations can be requested by parents, school personnel, or students who are of majority age. School psychologists most often conduct evaluations as part of the special education team's evaluation to determine eligibility for services; however, they might also conduct evaluations to help develop instructional or behavior plans for students, to identify significant mental health concerns, or to determine eligibility for gifted programs or school readiness.

In the context of special education, evaluations can only be conducted according to "due process" procedures-rules regarding notifying parents of minor students of the need for an evaluation, inviting parents to a planning meeting, and obtaining the parent's consent for the evaluation. Outside of special education, any psychological evaluation also requires parent consent. Students who have reached the age of majority take on these roles and must be included in planning the evaluation and give their own consent.

Staff members who are involved in planning the evaluation should remember that parents (and students) often feel some anxiety surrounding a referral for evaluation. They may be reluctant to give consent or participate for fear that the student will be labeled as crazy-or feel confusion or suspicion about the process and a possible change in placement. These issues are likely to be exacerbated when the family has cultural or linguistic differences. All school personnel should emphasize in a culturally appropriate manner that psychological evaluations are one of a number of methods used to help support the student's successful learning and development. Eliciting the full support of parents and students is not only required by law in terms of "informed consent," but will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the process.

What Are the Limitations of Psychological Evaluations?

It is important to recognize what psychological evaluations do and do not provide. They can provide estimates of ability and document the presence or absence of both positive and negative characteristics. However, evaluations seldom give guidance in selecting specific curriculum or determining appropriate class assignment or grade placement, generally cannot evaluate the quality of instruction, and rarely provide insight regarding why certain characteristics or problems exist, which usually requires a much broader set of information than what is gleaned from a psychological evaluation alone.

Depending on personnel availability, some requests for evaluation might be impossible or inappropriate for the school system to honor and resources in the community might be recommended. For example, parents might seek evaluation to assist with college admissions or eligibility for vocational training after graduation, which are not directly relevant to the provision of a K-12 education.

What Procedures Are Used?

Psychologists use different assessment procedures, or combinations of procedures, depending upon the reason for the evaluation. In the case of special education evaluations, some procedures are required by law to determine eligibility or to determine if a disability is related to a student's challenging behavior, such as using measures of ability and achievement to identify a learning or cognitive disability. Generally, psychologists' evaluation procedures fall into the following categories:

Standardized tests: Psychologists often use standardized tests of various abilities to compare an individual's performance to an appropriate peer group. These tests are developed and "normed" under standard conditions-using prescribed instructions, materials, and scoring to ensure reliable and valid comparisons. Scores are generally provided as a standard score or percentile rank. Some common examples include the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and the Woodcock Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery.

Rating scales: Rating scales to assess the presence or frequency of certain behaviors or skills are dependent on the perceptions of the rater, thus the psychologist's report should note who provided the ratings and describe his or her relationship to the student. The rater must be very familiar with the student to provide useful information, and using multiple raters helps reduce biased perceptions. Ideally the rating scales are normed to similar student populations so results indicate if a student's skill, behavior, or emotional status is "typical" or significantly different from peer groups. Examples of commonly used rating scales include the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) or Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales.

Self-report scales: Older students are often asked to provide ratings of their own behavior and skills. These measures are similar (or even identical) to other rating scales. They are often used in conjunction with teacher or parent rating scales and frequently have been normed. It can be useful to compare how students perceive themselves relative to how others perceive them. The BASC, for example, includes a self-report scale.

Observations: Psychologists can gather information about students' learning and behavior by directly observing them in familiar, comfortable settings, such as during class or social interactions. Observations not only address what a student is doing, but how others in the setting interact with him or her. Results might be reported as percents of intervals observed (e.g., attending to tasks during 70% of the observed intervals) or simply as general summaries of what occurred. The reliability of observations depends on the similarity of the observed session to "typical" situations; the more often the student is observed, the more likely it is for the psychologist to obtain a reliable sample of behavior.

Interviews: Direct interviews with students enable them to provide information about their histories, interpersonal relationships, concerns, and goals. The psychologist typically will summarize key information obtained through the interview, as well as relevant information learned by interviewing others who know the student well-usually teachers and parents.

Comprehensive evaluation: Not all types of assessment procedures are used or needed to conduct a comprehensive evaluation. The psychologist selects those procedures and tools that will help answer the referral questions. What is important is that the array of information gathered includes a review of what is already known, new information about areas of concern from a variety of sources, and verification of life factors (e.g., language or economics) that may affect the evaluation or the student's learning and behavior.

What Factors Influence Results?

Often the psychologist must take into account a number of factors that can influence the reliability or validity of evaluation results and affect how the evaluation results are interpreted:

- Similarity of the student to the norming population of the test (age, gender, ethnicity, economic status, type and location of community, etc.)
- Quality of the test's norms (adherence to standards of test development and standardization)
- Recent norms
- Testing conditions (individual or group administration; distractions or interruptions; consistency with standardized procedures; student's motivation, health, and attention during testing)
- Student's familiarity or comfort with the testing procedures
- Student's disabilities.

How Are Results Translated?

Psychological reports vary to some degree depending on the psychologist, procedures used, and questions asked. However, school administrators should expect all reports of psychological evaluations to provide clear information and make recommendations that are relevant to, and feasible within, the school system. Reports that are filled with jargon and unrelated to available services are of little help to the student or staff members.

To be useful, summaries of evaluations do not need to be long and detailed. Generally, detailed analyses of performance on small samples of behavior are misleading, unreliable, and not easily generalized to the classroom. Effective evaluation reports succinctly delineate the purpose, process, limitations, results, and recommendations resulting from the evaluation (see figure 1 below).

Consulting With Parents

Administrators typically do not communicate evaluation results directly to parents. The school psychologist and other team members usually provide a written and verbal report and should be available to answer questions and clarify information. In the course of disciplinary action or more proactive planning, principals are likely to discuss a student's behavior, mental health, or academic needs with his or her parents and should use the evaluation report for guidance.

It is impossible to remember all the details of a psychological evaluation, but taking time to review each report increases the likelihood that the principal will recall key pieces of information during a conference. It also helps to get any necessary clarification from the school psychologist before the conference and ensure that the parents also are familiar with and have already discussed the report with the psychologist. With prior preparation, the principal more likely will be able to ease tension surrounding the parents' concerns, respond to their questions, defuse disagreement, and offer counsel.

When reviewing the report with parents, focus on the purpose of the evaluation, the general interpretation of the results, and the services or strategies recommended to support the student. It is also vital to solicit the parents' input. Check to see if they find the report to be consistent with their impressions of and concerns about their child; if the recommendations are acceptable; and if the information generally is useful in resolving the current situation. It is usually beneficial to involve the psychologist who conducted the evaluation in at least part of the conference so parents can ask questions, seek clarification, and seek further consultation.

When parents disagree with the evaluation, it is important that everyone involved have the opportunity to discuss the parents' objections and consider the merits of their disagreement. Parents may identify factors that alter the interpretation of the results. Sometimes the most appropriate course of action is to allow parents to document their objections or conduct an additional evaluation to resolve concerns. Special education regulations provide for documenting dissenting opinions and considering second opinions.

When Is an Evaluation Appropriate?

Growing pressure on students from high-stakes tests and intense competition to get into college have generated a corresponding increase in requests from parents for psychological evaluations, most often as a means toward qualifying for accommodations on standards and entrance tests (e.g., modifications such as untimed tests or individualized administration). Because many tests allow (or must provide) accommodations for students with disabilities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities, parents may seek evaluations hoping to document a qualifying condition. Special education rules generally require teams to respond when parents or teachers request an evaluation to determine if a child has a disability. However, such requests often are made regarding students for whom no previous concerns have been expressed and who are earning passing grades but who attain lower-than-expected or -desired test scores.

Although it is legal to refuse a parent request in many situations, it can be difficult. School personnel can minimize unnecessary assessments and help parents and the student by listening to the parents' concerns; discussing the limitations of evaluations; suggesting more constructive ways to help their child; and, if warranted, recommending agencies that might conduct such assessments (usually for a fee) or provide consultation regarding realistic expectations (see figure 2 below). Situations where psychological evaluations are not likely to resolve concerns include:

- **Retention and promotion.** Although psychological evaluations can provide useful information for designing remedial instruction and establishing appropriate expectations, they are not designed to assess the potential effects of retention or promotion.
- **Graduation exit exams.** Concerns about academic failure should be based on more than low scores on graduation tests and addressed through other school services.
- **Social service and postsecondary program eligibility.** Parents may request an evaluation to qualify their child for social services, postsecondary programs, or college admission. Although an evaluation might provide the desired information, few public schools have sufficient funding and staffing to justify evaluations that do not contribute to the current school program.

Summary

Psychological evaluations are an everyday part of a school's student support system. When administrators understand the purpose, strengths, and limitations of these procedures and hold realistic expectations for their value, they are better prepared to support students, collaborate with families, and head off contentious or even litigious confrontations. Evaluations cannot solve every student problem, but their wise and selective application can add a positive, constructive dimension to effective school management. **PL**

Figure 1: Components of Comprehensive Assessment

Not all types of assessments are used or needed to conduct a comprehensive assessment. What is important is that the array of information gathered includes:

- A review of what is already known about the student relative to the referral questions (school history, grades, past test performance, attendance, medical history, disciplinary records, current or past special education records, etc.)
- Relevant new information from multiple sources (e.g., from school, family)
- Relevant new information about areas of concern (e.g., reading skills for reading problems, cognitive skills to address questions of ability; behavior observations and ratings for behavior problems, etc.)
- Any specific required procedures (e.g., measures that address criteria for special education eligibility)
- Verification of language proficiency for students whose first language is not English
- Information that helps teams determine if culture, language, health, or economic factors may affect the results of assessment or the student's behavior and learning.

Figure 2: The Psychologist's Report

The psychologist's evaluation report will vary to some degree depending on the referral issues and procedures used. However, all evaluation reports should include:

- A statement of the primary purpose of the assessment
- A brief summary of relevant background (significant factors in school or health history, previous services, and evaluations)
- A list of procedures used in the current evaluation
- A statement noting any limitations of the assessment (such as cautions due to breach of standardized procedures, limited English proficiency, cultural variables, etc.)
- A summary of the results of all procedures relative to the referral questions, including general statements about performance on standardized tests and summaries of information obtained from other types of assessments
- A discussion of the meaning of these results in the context of any other assessments (such as academic and vocational measures administered by other team members) as related to the referral questions
- Summary statements providing answers to referral questions
- Recommendations relevant to referral questions (e.g., special services, instructional modifications, and behavior management strategies).

Determining Appropriate Requests

To help determine if a psychological evaluation is appropriate and, if not, what alternatives may address the real cause of concern, principals and other school personnel should consider:

- What or who prompted this request?
- What specific problem is described?
- Is there any history of this problem and, if so, how has it been addressed in the past?
- Has there been a previous evaluation?
- What are the parents' expectations and goals?
- What are the student's expectations and goals?
- How does the student perceive the situation?
- Do current teachers have similar concerns?
- Are there any relevant cultural, health, or attendance issues?
- Is the family involved with any community agencies?
- Will this evaluation address the expressed concerns or identify any relevant conditions or interventions?

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