



1500 W. Third Ave. #228
Columbus, OH 43212
Phone: (614) 285-4589
mail@ospaonline.org
www.ospaonline.org

Senate Education Committee

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HB 96, State Operating Budget

Rachel Chilton, Executive Director, Ohio School Psychologists Association

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing and Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 96. I am Rachel Chilton, executive director of the Ohio School Psychologists Association, and I am here to testify on issues related specifically to the profession of school psychology.

Firstly, I would like to thank the governor for including in the budget the school psychology intern program special education enhancement funding. This program is vital to the profession as it supports the DEW-approved school psychology training programs by funding intern placements in school districts. This state funding has been provided since the 1960s. We continue to experience shortages of school psychologists in many parts of the state. The university training programs address these shortages by working in their geographic regions to determine where the unmet needs are and then working with districts to establish intern placements.

In 2022, OSPA awarded a scholarship to a school psychology student who subsequently returned the funds and left the program because, when she discovered the amount of the intern salary, she realized she could not afford to continue. OSPA gives these scholarships to the most promising school psychology students. We also cannot be sure how many students decide not to enter programs when they learn they must work full time in their final year and rely on a salary of around \$30,000. University programs advise students not to hold second jobs during their internship.

The intern program portion of the Special Education Enhancements line item is funded at \$3 million in each fiscal year; however, we know that this amount actually underfunds the intended support to this program. The money in this line goes to school districts to allow them to pay a salary to the school psychologist intern, as has been the practice for more than 60 years. However, the salary was always meant to be based on the teacher minimum salary schedule. The legislature has now increased the teacher minimum salary schedule twice while overlooking the school psych intern line item, so interns are earning typically below \$30,000 while working full time. The salary for a first-year teacher, however, is \$35,000. The school psychology intern line has been flat funded since FY 2017-18.

We hope the legislature can see fit to increase the funding flowing to this program just to bring it up to where it was always meant to be. Doing so would require an increase to \$4,252,500 in each year of the biennium and this would guarantee we can add at least 100 school psychologists to the workforce each year. This calculation reflects funding for up to 108 interns at a base of \$35,000 plus 12.5% benefits for a salary of \$39,375 each.



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OSPA believes this is a modest request in support, especially as we also know that other states have offered higher salaries to Ohio students to do their internships elsewhere. Michigan, for instance, this year is offering salaries north of \$45,000, with some providing tuition reimbursement. With the University of Toledo and University of Findlay near the border, this creates a considerable threat to keeping those students in Ohio. UT says they are seeing much more student interest in interning in Michigan with some saying they are offered double the Ohio salary. That gets communicated among the cohort. In Georgia, meanwhile, a district is offering \$60,000 plus a \$2,500 sign-on bonus. Ohio interns who receive these budget funds are required to work in Ohio after they graduate. It is likely other states have this same requirement, thus we are training Ohioans to work in other states.

An analysis of the workforce pipeline for school psychology in Ohio shows the percentage of interns who remained in the profession serving Ohio schools one year after internship was 97.8%. Three years after internship, 94.7% and 89.9% continued to work as school psychologist in Ohio five years after internship.

This year, programs were told certain districts cannot host any interns because their union requires the state minimum salary be provided. This was despite the interns being highly talented and staff in the district strongly desiring to host them. This is a detriment to districts with vacant positions. Akron City Schools, for instance, typically hires half their school psychology interns each year, and the University of Findlay had seven of nine interns land jobs at their placement sites last year.

Consider also that 28% of the intern salary is diverted to STRS (14% for the intern, 14% for the district) and could be higher with future changes from STRS. Although it is wonderful the interns get a year's credit in STRS, this cuts into their rent, car payments, and other living expenses.

A graduate of the University of Dayton says she worked two or three jobs throughout grad school, received financial support from her parents, and still struggled to pay rent during the internship year even in a relatively low cost of living city. Cleveland State University says all its interns are working additional jobs, and Ohio State University reports that all their students have taken out loans to support them during the internship year.

This intern funding is the lifeblood of the Ohio School Psychology Intern program and is essential to its continuation and our continued efforts to fill the school psychologist shortage. The paid internship is a prudent investment in the recruitment, high-quality preparation, and retention of psychologists in schools. The services provided by interns increase the capacity of schools to address the academic, mental and behavioral health needs of students. An evaluation of last year's program found interns provided Tier 1 supports and services to 51,874 students, Tier 2 interventions to 2,476 students, and Tier 3 interventions to 2,173 students. Interns are providing both academic and behavioral interventions.



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Several university programs have also had their interns take on “Change Projects.” This involves the intern investigating an area of need and then implementing and evaluating a program to address it. The goal is to create something of value that will continue in the district even once the intern departs.

We have nine Ohio and nationally approved school psychology graduate training programs and they collectively place 100 to 105 interns in approved school district intern sites for their last supervised year of training. This supply of school psychologists has until the last dozen or so years met the job placement demand for most school districts, except for some in the more remote rural pockets of the state, where recruitment and retention has been more challenging. I would like to acknowledge the university training programs, all of which have expanded their acceptance numbers to the allowable and have increased in recent years the number of counties being served by interns.

The University of Findlay, however, is now finding it has more qualified applicants than available spots. Faculty say the biggest barrier to expanding the program is internship funding. If they take more students, and the intern funding remains flat, each intern will receive an even smaller share of the money.

I would like to make note of other elements of the budget, which OSPA supports:

- Additional funding in the State Board of Psychology budget to support one additional hybrid position and the increased operational costs in light of the 3,200 new school psychology licensees the board now oversees.
- Cost-input updates to and continued phase in of the Cupp-Patterson school funding formula.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information.