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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES
AMONG SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN RESPONSE TO THE
REVISED CHAPTER 14 REGULATIONS GOVERNING
STUDENT EVALUATION TIMEFRAMES

A Dissertation

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Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Title: An Exploratory Study of Professional Practices among School Psychologists
in Response to the Revised Chapter 14 Regulations Governing Student
Evaluation Timeframes

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In an effort to align state special education law with federal legislation under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, Pennsylvania has adopted Chapter 14 special education regulations. Chapter 14 is designed to ensure that every student with a disability is afforded a free and appropriate public education designed to provide the student full participation in school and the community. It is through Chapter 14 that student evaluations and subsequent special educational services are provided. On July 1, 2008 the statewide implementation of Chapter 14 modified its required timeframe for the completion of student evaluations from 60 school to 60 calendar days. School psychologists practicing in Pennsylvania consequently began the 2008/2009 school year with approximately one-third less time allocated for the completion of student evaluations. This descriptive case study illustrates the process and context school psychologists practicing within a large area of Pennsylvania's South-Central region have experienced in response to this legislative change.

Interviews based on guiding criteria by Seidman (2006) were conducted with school psychologists and supervisors of special education to address the research questions involved in this case study, while the interpretive framework from *Doing Qualitative Research in Educational Studies* (Hatch, 2002) guided the analysis of

individual and focus group responses about changed individual and organizational practices.

The study's findings are predicated upon the convergence of information from three sources of data involving school psychologists and special education supervisors (survey questionnaire, individual interviews, and focus group interviews). The convergence of information underscores both the process and context of changed practice involved in practitioner adjustment.

The results of this study provide facilitative insights into specific changes made and practices adopted by school psychologists as they seek to redefine their role within the school environment. Areas of practitioner agreement and divergence are explored and noted as they pertain to the research questions involving adjustment. In addition, the results offer school psychologists recommendations to consider in an effort to diversify their role and core competencies within the school despite legislatively imposed time constraints.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	INTRODUCTION.....	1
	Statement of the Problem.....	3
	Purpose of the Study.....	3
	Significance of the Study.....	4
	Research Questions.....	6
	Definition of Terms.....	6
	Implications of Regulatory Change Related to This Study.....	7
	Limitations of the Study.....	11
	Summary.....	13
II	REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	15
	Introduction.....	15
	No Child Left Behind Legislation of 2001: A Synopsis of the Related Literature.....	16
	Assessment and Intervention Mandate within No Child Left Behind.....	17
	Research Literature on Child-Study Teams and School-Wide Interventions: A Conceptual Framework.....	19
	Theoretical Construct and Functions of Child Study Teams.....	20
	Reading First Research.....	22
	Reading Recovery Instructional Approach.....	23
	Potential Limitations of Child Study Teams.....	24
	Research Literature on Instructional Support Team and Response to Intervention Problem-Solving Models.....	25
	Instructional Support Team Outcomes.....	26
	Response to Intervention Model.....	31
	Research Literature and Legislation on the Special Education Process.....	38
	Factors Governing Special Education.....	38
	The Evaluative Process of Chapter 14 Special Education.....	41
	Components of the Evaluation Report.....	43
	Evaluation Time and Placement Data.....	46
	Research Literature on Change Theory.....	47
	Summary.....	51

Chapter		Page
III	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	53
	Rationale for the Chosen Methodology.....	53
	Setting of the Study.....	60
	Research Design.....	62
	Questionnaire Pool.....	62
	Interview Pool.....	63
	Method of Subject Selection.....	64
	Administrator Pool.....	64
	The Psychologist Focus Group Pool.....	65
	Method of Subject Selection.....	65
	Pool Size.....	66
	Procedural Methods.....	68
	Questionnaire and Interviews.....	68
	Typological Analysis Framework.....	69
	Summary.....	72
IV	PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA.....	74
	Contextual Background.....	74
	School Psychologist Responses to the Questionnaire.....	76
	Psychologists' Responses to In-Depth Interviews.....	86
	Focus Group Responses to Interview.....	101
	Special Education Supervisors' Responses to Interview.....	115
	Summary.....	129
V	DISCUSSION.....	131
	Purpose of the Study.....	131
	Research Question One.....	132
	Survey Items.....	133
	Interview Questions.....	133
	Research Question Two.....	138
	Survey Items.....	138
	Interview Questions.....	138
	Research Question Three.....	142
	Survey Item.....	143
	Interview Questions.....	143
	Research Question Four.....	146
	Survey Items.....	147
	Interview Questions.....	147
	Relationship of Research Findings to Existing Literature.....	152
	Recommendations for Professional Practice.....	157

Chapter	Page
Directions for Future Research.....	162
Conclusion.....	164
REFERENCES.....	167

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Composition of Personnel, by County, Participating in this Study.....	61
2	Composition of Schools, by County, Supported by Study Participants.....	61
3	Research Question Alignment to Questionnaire and Interview Items.....	67
4	Survey Results.....	84

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	Instructional Support Team Conceptual Framework.....	28
2	Pennsylvania's Response to Intervention Framework.....	33

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1975, Congress enacted and President Gerald Ford signed into law the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (PL 94-142) to support states and localities in providing: educational needs and rights for disabled youth and their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Since the implementation of PL 94-142, significant progress has been reported in meeting major national goals in the areas of early intervention, special education, and related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In 1997, PL 94-142 was reenacted as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) with the added provision that all students with disabilities have equal access to the general educational curriculum. IDEA further required schools to include children with disabilities in state and district level assessments (IDEA, 1997). The inclusionary and assessment goals of this legislation were continued with IDEA of 2004 (IDEA, 2004).

In an effort to align state special education law with federal legislation, Pennsylvania adopted Chapter 14 regulations on June 15, 1990 (22 PA Code). Chapter 14 provides regulatory guidance to ensure compliance with the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004*. Chapter 14 is designed to ensure every student with a disability is afforded a free and appropriate public education designed to enable the student full participation in school and the community. It further serves to ensure that students with disabilities and their parents are protected through the promulgation of procedural safeguards (22 PA Code). It is through Chapter 14 that student evaluations and subsequent special educational services are provided.

Chapter 14 changes have recently come under scrutiny by special interest and parent advocacy groups to substantially limit the available time permitted to conduct student evaluations. In response to this challenge, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education (Chapter 14 Committee), hereafter referred to as the Board, held five regional public roundtable meetings during December 2006 and January 2007 wherein stakeholders were afforded an opportunity to share their concerns about special education. Following receipt and analysis of comments, the Board proceeded to either modify the proposed regulation or maintain it with an explanatory rationale. On July 1, 2008 the proposed special education regulations (Chapter 14) became law and public school entities were required to implement and comply with the final form legislation.

Chapter 14 provides specific procedures to be followed by public school constituencies for students who have been identified as requiring special educational services as well as those thought to be students who may have an educational disability. It governs the timeframes permitted for the evaluation/re-evaluation and identification of students in need of special education services and programs. The revisions to Chapter 14 are designed to better align with the IDEA, as amended December 3, 2004.

One of the changes governs student evaluation and re-evaluation timeframes in determining a child's eligibility for special educational services. Specifically, prior to July 1, 2008 regulations provided for a 60 school day maximum from the date a student was referred for a multidisciplinary evaluation/re-evaluation until the date the school-based team convenes to review the results and recommendations of the evaluation/re-evaluation. Under the Chapter 14 change, the maximum allowable time for a student evaluation/re-evaluation was modified to 60 calendar days excluding the summer months.

This equates to a 33% reduction in available time schools are allocated for the completion of student evaluations.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, school psychologists have allocated a significant portion of their time toward student assessments at the exclusion of other related competencies such as case consultation, mental health/crisis counseling, program planning and research, and instructional design. Since the 1970s the percentage of time devoted to individual evaluation has ranged from 30% to 60% (Anderson, Cancelli, & Kratochwill, 1984). Huebner (1993) further asserts that a substantial portion of school psychologists' time is dedicated toward assessment functions.

School districts currently struggling to comply with the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) may likely experience increased hardship under the recently enacted Chapter 14 changes governing special education. Although most educators accept the goals contained in the federal legislation, most school leaders find themselves in a quandary with the accountability and compliance of the mandates that accompany the law (Thornton, Hill, & Usinger, 2006). Similarly, while special education stakeholders generally perceive the intentions of Chapter 14 as well-meaning and legitimate, implementing the revised changes will likely require a thorough examination of existing practices and subsequent modifications.

Purpose of the Study

School psychologists have begun the 2008/2009 school year with 33% less time allocated for the completion of student evaluations. The purpose of this study was to

explore how school psychologists have adjusted to the change in timeframes governing student evaluations, and what, if any, modifications to their existing work practices they have made in response to the change. Supportive areas of examination include the potential for decreased participation in continued professional development activities among school psychologists, overall compliance with the regulatory time statute, approach to student evaluations, and the effect on the practicing psychologist's allocation of time beyond the regular contracted work day. This study intended to stimulate further professional discourse among school psychologists regarding problem awareness and identification of pragmatic strategies that may serve to ease the transition to this change.

Significance of the Study

Chapter 14 special education regulations may have a strong propensity to present increasing challenges for those educators responsible for student evaluations and re-evaluations. This study was significant in that it sought to identify systematic trends and patterns observed by school psychologists and multi-disciplinary teams that may be affected by the reduction of time in the completion of the evaluative process. Since student evaluations conducted within the Commonwealth adhere to a standardized format, one may reasonably inquire whether the reduction in available time will result in negative consequences including an inadequate report. As Lichtenstein and Fischetti (1998) suggest, evaluation time becomes truncated "as the time required to complete assigned evaluations begins to approach the total working hours in a school psychologist's work day" (p. 147).

School districts that have predominantly high referral caseloads coupled with marginal pre-referral intervention teams may experience the greatest challenge adjusting

to this regulatory change. In an effort to comply with the law and curtail compensatory grievance complaints, school psychologists may experience an increased pressure to test students during the course of the school day and defer any analysis and report writing function toward their off work hours. The potential of this practice could have profound effects on heightened stress levels and subsequent “burnout.” In fact, Van Horn, Calje, Schreurs and Schaufeli (1997) indicate an increase in workload, in combination with a decrease in autonomy, represent critical factors for the development of burnout among teachers in general. They further suggest emotional exhaustion is the chief cause of burnout among dedicated teachers.

Given the organizational pressures to comply with Chapter 14 changes, school psychologists and other multi-disciplinary members may succumb to ill health and have to leave their profession prematurely. In an effort to address adequately the potential for high attrition rates among school personnel, it will be imperative that school psychologists systematically examine the problems they encounter in response to regulatory changes. By studying the effects of change on current conditions, administrative leadership is in an advantageous position to identify existing issues and problems related to the change for the purpose of effectively planning and positively influencing professional practice. Such an approach contributes to advancing constructive relationships among professional staff and serves to enhance student welfare. The findings from this study also may have added utility should the timeframe governing student evaluations become even more truncated in the future as Chapter 14 continues to be heavily influenced by parent advocates and special interest groups.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study included:

1. How, if at all, does the truncated timeframe governing student evaluations affect the quality of evaluation reports?
2. How, if at all, does the change influence compliance rates?
3. To what extent, if any, has the reduced timeframe contributed to additional work beyond the contractual work day?
4. What, if any, policies/practices have school psychologists and other school leaders implemented or changed in fulfilling their responsibilities as they relate to student evaluations?

In addressing the answers to these questions, this qualitative study examined the responses that study participants provided through a series of survey data, follow-up interviews, and focus discussion groups throughout the 2008/2009 school year.

Definition of Terms

Assessment quality. The integration of multiple sources of information used to reduce limitations of conclusions and strengthen the validity of the findings (Knof, 2002; McConaughy & Riter, 2002; Riccio & Rodriguez, 2007; Teglasi, 2004).

Instructional Support Team. A multi-disciplinary group of individuals who develop and implement systematic interventions within the student's regular education environment. These interventions are targeted toward specific instructional, behavioral, emotional, and communication needs of the child (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999).

Professional Development Activities. Those activities designed to assist an individual become more highly proficient in his/her professional capacity (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Reading Recovery. An early intervention program for first grade students that is tailored to the individual child's needs, and is based on the child's strengths (O'Connor & Simic, 2002).

Response to Intervention. A three-tier problem solving model that assesses a student's response to scientifically based instructional practices (Gresham, 2005).

Student Evaluation. A process that yields useful information in identifying student strengths, needs, in understanding problems and measuring progress of instructional intervention practices (National Association of School Psychology, 2004).

Implications of Regulatory Change Related to This Study

For the purpose of this study, four potentially adverse implications among school psychologists impinging on the 60 calendar day statute were discussed. This was not intended to be an exhaustive list, but was being advanced on the premise that these implications would be the most problematic experiences observed by educators involved in the evaluative process. These include: (1) lowered quality of assessment; (2) decline of participation in professional development activities; (3) failure to comply with the prescribed timeframe resulting in additional contractual services outside the district; and, (4) additional work completed beyond the contractual work day potentially resulting in increased stress.

In many Pennsylvania school districts, school psychologists are primarily responsible for completing the student evaluation(s) in coordination with other

appropriate education staff. Subsequent to receiving written parental consent it is incumbent upon the psychologist to utilize multiple sources of information measures to address adequately the referral questions and determine the need for more intensive educational services. Multiple sources of information serve to strengthen the validity of the findings and facilitate assessment quality. Given the volume of referrals encountered by many districts, the goal of achieving a 100% completion rate under the truncated timeframe may prove daunting.

As school psychologists adjust to available time for student evaluations some may become vulnerable to inadvertently compromising the quality of the evaluation through screening instruments. This may be motivated or perhaps administratively recommended in the interest of obtaining some measure of the phenomenon under question (i.e. achievement) while saving time. There are many commercially available tests that appeal to brevity in administration/scoring. School psychologists need to ensure that such measures, if used, conform to acceptable psychometric properties and ethical practices.

Likewise, it is vital that supplementary data are not overlooked due to the time constraints that multiple information sources may impose. For example, a thorough records review goes well beyond the student's cumulative academic folder and includes health files, disciplinary files, and/or any supplemental folders involved during intervention planning such as instructional support or student assistance. Further, classroom observations should not be categorically curtailed to save time, but should be conducted in a manner consistent with best practices to address adequately the circumstances bearing on the referral statement.

Ultimately, the end product of the evaluative process should be twofold. First, the evaluation needs to address any/all skill deficits (e.g. academic, cognitive, developmental) that are believed to impede the student's optimal learning potential. Following this analysis, it is critical to systematically outline what specific accommodations, services, and programming are required to reduce the instructional discrepancy between the student's present and expected level of achievement.

A second adverse implication involves the potential to restrict professional development activities or training in the interest of meeting high stakes expectations. Many school psychologists may succumb to sacrificing other professional development opportunities as a way to cope with less time. By embracing this approach, psychologists need to ask themselves whether they have reduced their professional capacity to that of a psychometrician. Psychologists are reminded that they have a responsibility to ensure a number of competencies related to the areas of case consultation, effective instructional practices, socialization and development of life skills, policy development/climate, school and systems organization and prevention, crisis intervention, and mental health (NASP, 2004; Ysseldyke, Dawson, Lehr, Reschly, Reynolds, & Telzrow, 1997).

As the volume of student evaluations remains relatively unchanged, school leaders may encounter the need to expand school psychological services to complete the evaluation reports in a timely manner. Some school districts may attempt to employ cost reduction measures by entering into contractual agreements with independent, outside sources. However, school administrations need to be acutely aware that private firms are equally motivated to reduce cost by reducing time. This may result in the failure to perform certain functions and result in a less than appropriate product. Independent

sources may view interviews, observations, and attendance at meetings as unnecessary components of the evaluation report thereby leaving the school district more vulnerable for litigation (Lichenstein & Fischetti, 1998). Canter and Dryden (1993) observed this trend in Georgia when school districts contracted for evaluation services. The contractors were not present at the multidisciplinary conferences and were not afforded the opportunity to conduct necessary observations with the students or to interview teachers.

Although the goal of achieving a 100% compliance rate will likely be pursued by all practitioners, the reality for some may prove too unrealistic to fulfill given current resource allocations. Consequently, some districts may experience increased litigation, namely for those students evaluated and found to be eligible for special educational services. Parent advocacy and special interest groups have become exceptionally skilled in organizing reforms and influencing lawmakers with regard to services for disabled children (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2004.)

Should school districts exhibit a systematic pattern of low compliance rates relative to evaluations, they may encounter a plethora of grievances filed with Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) resulting in time consuming investigations and subsequent compensatory educational costs. School district local education authorities (LEAs) who are cognizant that their total evaluation referrals have historically exceeded their resource capacities to realistically manage them are strongly advised to explore courses of action that comply with educational law while adhering to best evaluation practices.

The final implication of a truncated timeframe involves work beyond the contractual day that may contribute to added stress. The existing literature base

examining the effects of high work demands and low autonomy on strain; otherwise known as stress, is prolific (De jonge & Kompier, 1997; Jones & Fletcher, 1996; McClenahan, Giles, & Mallett, 2007; Payne & Fletcher, 1983; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Many teachers and support staff such as school psychologists experience strain when work demands are perceived as excessive. A sense of “burnout” may be an adverse byproduct of such experience. Burnout occurs in contracted professionals and takes the form of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1993; Peeters & Rutte, 2005). Attempting to achieve a 100% completion rate for student evaluations with existing resources may present ambitious challenges that heighten stress to unhealthy levels. This, in turn, may lead to physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. Administrative expectations that conform to the status quo or business as usual approach, without some adaptations, may unknowingly contribute to the burnout of school staff. If faced with such prospects it would be prudent for school psychologists to assume a leadership role through policy development recommendations as effective practice.

Limitations of the Study

Attempting to determine the effects of restricted time on student evaluations and professional practice(s) will be limited by several factors. First, there have been several additional Chapter 14 changes in conjunction with the 60 calendar day timeframe mandated for student evaluations. One of the specific changes involves structural changes in the evaluation report itself. Although this study attempted to examine the relationship between assessment time as an independent variable and report quality and related professional practice(s) as dependent measures, the fact that the evaluation report

has been modified to include required components from previous years may serve to confound the validity of the results.

Since the PDE mandates the format of the evaluation report, it is not possible to change the structure of the evaluation report consistent with previous versions. As a result, participants may indicate that report quality and professional development activities have been adversely affected by the restriction in evaluative time when, in fact, such reported observations may be partly due to a more robust regulatory requirement. For example, the report format, under the new provisions, requires evidence that appropriate instructional components have been provided to the student in reading and mathematics as determining factors in special education eligibility. Additional components include an analysis and discussion about the “research based intervention(s)” used to assist the student to achieve appropriate educational gains, instructional strategies used, and specific teacher recommendations (Title 22 Pa Code, Chapter 14, 2008).

A second limitation of this study involved controlling for divergent experiences and responsibilities from study participants. Many of the volunteer psychologists and special education directors participating in this study worked in moderate to large districts with pre-referral screening teams that employ systematic methods. Conversely, other participating professionals work in environments that have less effective pre-referral (e.g. Response to Intervention-RtI) teams in place and/or may experience increased challenges by a greater demand of parent-advocacy initiated referrals. A third group of study participants were those program psychologists who worked in class assignments where referrals were generally low to begin with, since these students had been placed in one of the special educational classes. The responsibility of this group

typically involves assistance with the child's existing IEP team consultations and behavioral programming versus student reevaluation. Although these groups may experience different perceptions regarding the restricted timeframe on student evaluations/professional practices, the significance of the impact was likely governed by the specific responsibilities and context of each study participant's work assignment which varied considerably from one district to another.

Summary

This chapter illustrated and discussed the potential challenges school districts encounter as they transition from 60 school days to 60 calendar days in the conduct of student evaluations. When school leadership systematically examines current policies/practices relative to new legislation they tend to increase their probability for success through innovative and responsible planning (Darling-Hammond, 2004). It is this underlying premise that serves as the basis for this current study.

Conversely, those schools that do not choose to examine the consequences that change brings to the evaluative process may find themselves ill-equipped to resolve a number of issues. As noted earlier in this chapter, these issues may include attrition of professional staff, potential health concerns, compromised productivity in work as manifested by decreased quality, lack of time for necessary professional development, and increased costs to maintain compliance through outside contracting for psychological services.

The literature review that follows comprehensively addresses the student evaluative process as it relates to public schools. By examining current problem-solving models in concert with productive responses to organizational change, recommendations

will be made to assist educators in incorporating change in a meaningful and constructive way to their existing practices. Finally, the process of special education and multi-disciplinary evaluation components are discussed in order to allow a much greater appreciation for the depth and breadth of the potential problems one may encounter in complying with the 60 calendar day change for student evaluations.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

In order to understand individual and organizational responses to the evaluative changes brought on by the recently enacted special educational revisions, the reader is provided with a review of the related literature.

First, a descriptive review of the NCLB Act of 2001 with an emphasis on assessment, annual yearly progress (AYP), and accountability of appropriate student achievement will be discussed. Following this discussion, child study teams and school-wide interventions are discussed in detail to inform the reader of their intended functions in linking assessment and intervention with core curriculum programming. Next, the instructional support team and response to intervention problem-solving models are discussed to illustrate their relationship with the special education process for students who continue to respond ineffectively to intervention planning. Discussion of these conceptual models of intervention highlight research findings from current studies and describe their effectiveness within the targeted student populations. The literature review describes the special education process within Pennsylvania and detail the core evaluative components required to be completed within the 60 calendar day period. Finally, an examination of change theories that relate to this study of professional practices in response to policy change and adaptation were examined. This final point serves to assess the impact change has on an organization's structure as it undergoes a transitional process. Moderator variables such as time management behavior, psychological climate factors (e.g. positive perceptions of the work environment), supervisory support, and

control (autonomy) were explored in the context of current research studies in an effort to identify positive correlates during organizational change.

No Child Left Behind Legislation of 2001:

A Synopsis of the Related Literature

The NCLB represents a legislative revision to previous reform initiatives in American schools. NCLB has its roots in the 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) enacted during the Johnson administration. While the goal of ESEA was to reduce the achievement discrepancy among categories of children, the specific process to achieve this goal, which included standards-based reform and an assessment of yearly progress, has received a great deal of federal attention in recent years (Wakeman, Browder, Meier, & McColl, 2007).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a critical analysis of the American education system entitled *A Nation at Risk*. This report addressed the expectations of learning, the time allocated to learning, and the quality of teaching. In 1994, the *Educate America Act* represented a comprehensive effort by the federal government to assist schools and students in meeting academic standards. It established eight goals that served to promote student support, academic standards, and student progress. Goals 2000 further required each state to draft its academic standards from subject-based national organizations (Watt, 2005).

The *Improving America's Schools Act of 1994* reinforced Title I initiatives including the mandate of requiring all students to meet high standards based on state developed content and performance standards, and a system of evaluation of yearly student progress. In 1997, the reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities*

Education Act required all students with disabilities to have equal access to the general educational curriculum, and required schools to include children with disabilities in state and district level assessments (IDEA, 1997). The inclusionary and assessment goals of this legislation were continued with IDEA of 2004 (IDEA, 2004).

The NCLB represents the most recent federal reauthorization of ESEA and places a number of required mandates on schools. These include measuring student achievement through standards-based benchmarks; the establishment of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which is obtained if a school exceeds their annual objectives; identification of “highly qualified teacher status;” the inclusion of all subgroups (including at-risk and children with disabilities) in standards-based reform efforts; a rigorous assessment process across the K-12 curriculum; and a comprehensive accountability system predicated upon scientifically-based instructional literature. Overall, the NCLB affects education from kindergarten through high school and is built on four fundamental principles: accountability for results; more parental choices; greater local autonomy; and, an emphasis on interventions predicated upon scientific research (Department of Education, 2003). Of these four principles, it is the accountability and intervention factors that often determine student growth and subsequent educational placement.

Assessment and Intervention Mandate within No Child Left Behind

Under NCLB, each state is required to specifically develop and implement assessments for determining whether its schools and local educational agencies (LEAs) are making adequate yearly progress. AYP is the way each state measures its progress toward the goal of 100% of students meeting state standards in the areas of

reading/language arts and mathematics by 2013. It establishes the minimum level of proficiency schools must attain each year on annual tests and supplemental achievement indicators. Assessment results are compiled and reviewed annually at the local, state, and national level for the purpose of evaluating program efficacy toward intended goals.

In an effort to guide curriculum planners in instructional delivery decisions, NCLB further advocates the use of “scientifically-based research” as a paradigm to guide practitioners about which interventions to implement. The goal of this approach is to improve educational outcomes toward the 100% academic proficiency standards by conducting continuous progress monitoring and documenting growth in student achievement. The U.S. Department of Education, as an extension of NCLB, has established criteria for states in determining whether an intervention comprises rigorous evidence, and makes existing evidence-based educational interventions available to schools by consulting with on-line or downloadable web sites.

In addition to the requirements and goals of NCLB, the legislation provides a number of punitive consequences for schools if they do not achieve their AYP targets. This ranges from the designation of Identified for Improvement (IFI) status after two consecutive years of failure to progressively more restrictive consequences including supplemental educational services, curricular realignment, school day reconfiguration, and dismissal of staff (LeFloch, Taylor, & Thomsen, 2006).

It is additionally incumbent upon states to develop school support teams and defined roles for high performing teachers and principals. Further, NCLB provides the funding resource through which schools can provide programmatic interventions such as Reading First (LeFloch, Taylor, & Thomsen, 2006). It is the team building capacity and

comprehensive assessment sections of NCLBA which relate most closely with the focus of this study.

Research Literature on Child-Study Teams and School-Wide Interventions: A Conceptual Framework

As standards-based educational reform has received increasing public attention since the passage of NCLB, accountability mechanisms have evolved in theoretical complexity (LeFloch, et al., 2006). In an effort to provide an understanding of responses to accountability efforts, Fuhrman (1999) and her colleagues at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education drew upon a model predicated upon expectancy and goal-setting theory (Kelly, Oden, Milanowski, & Heneman, 1998). In essence, this model indicates teachers will be motivated to attain a school's achievement goals provided they are highly involved in the effort (expectancy perception), believe to a large extent the achieved goal will lead to positive outcomes such as bonus awards (instrumentality perception), and place a value, favorably or unfavorably to these outcomes (Fuhrman, 1999; LeFloch et. al., 2006).

Team models of intervention planning have evolved over the last three decades since the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*. These models have generally involved the knowledge and expertise of a number of school personnel working together as a collaborative team in a problem-solving capacity to assist the referred student to succeed instructionally (Knotek, 2003). These team based intervention models are often referred to as Child Study Teams (CST), Student Study Teams (SST), or Student Support Teams depending upon how each state's educational legislation defines them (Klinger & Harry, 2006; Lee-Tarver, 2006). An understanding of the structure and

purpose of the child study team is often a necessary prerequisite for effective team-building outcomes.

Theoretical Construct and Functions of Child Study Teams

Ecological theory provides the theoretical structure for the team concept model within schools (Phillipo & Stone, 2006). As social systems, their function is best conceptualized as involving structure (purpose and membership), processes (roles and norms, communication patterns, power distribution, cohesiveness, and decision-making), and activities and tasks (Toseland & Rivas, 2004). Effective team building capacity is theorized to function best when members share a mutual goal, maintain respect for one another, value the expertise and ideas of other members, and hold each other appropriately accountable (Villa & Thousand, 2000).

CSTs are mandated by state and federal law to provide the student with educational rights, referred to as procedural safeguards to ensure a fair and appropriate education (Ross, 1995). The goal of these CSTs is to identify instructional interventions that could be implemented in the classroom for the purpose of increasing the student's instructional gains (Fuchs, 1991). Additional functions of these teams have included referral to other school-based or community resources when their condition adversely affects their educational performance or identification of a disability when a student's lack of progress in the regular education curriculum warrants more intensive programming (Lee-Tarver, 2006; Terrasi, Sennet, & Macklin, 1999).

Conceptually, the pre-referral or CST is designed to objectively determine the student's present levels of functioning as a precursor to identifying classroom-based interventions related to the problem area (Knotek, 2003). Once interventions have been

collectively agreed upon by all team members they are implemented in the appropriate setting and later assessed to determine their efficacy. The pre-referral team ultimately becomes the focal point of the school-wide intervention process. Specifically, students are either deemed successful at making appropriate academic growth and are brought back under the core general education curriculum or are determined to be at continued academic risk of future academic failure and referred to a more formalized process of assessment (Rock & Zigmond, 2001).

In the absence of effective team based planning and interventions for the lowest performing children, teachers respond by placing them in the lowest ability reading groups which often results in a wider achievement gap (O'Connor & Simic, 2002). Referred to as the Matthew Effect by Stanovich (1986), these children experience further academic decline and are labeled slow, developmentally delayed, or disabled as their age peers continue to accelerate (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

The specific intervention a CST decides to implement can take one of many forms and may include such recommendations as small group instruction, one-to-one instruction outside of the classroom, peer tutoring, or structured behavioral programming and counseling. With the NCLB emphasis on scientific based research programming, CST have relied upon early intervention and instructional reading programs such as Reading Recovery and Reading First as part of their intervention process. Given their degree of importance as early intervention efforts, a concise review of these programs will follow.

Reading First Research

The centerpiece of the NCLB act is a six billion dollar federal program designed to assist students at risk for reading failure to succeed by the end of third grade. This program, entitled Reading First, was the resultant outcome of the 2000 National Reading Panel report (Allen, 2008). The report further summarized five essential features involved in reading success. These features included instructional emphasis in the following areas: phonemic awareness; phonics; developing fluency; vocabulary; and, reading comprehension (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Schools with the lowest achievement in reading as well as low SES are eligible for federal grants with the objective of having all children function at grade expectancy (Roehrig, Duggar, Moats, Glover, & Mincey, 2008).

Reading First has been implemented across a number of schools nationally as an accountability mechanism to ensure literacy success. As a prerequisite to the federal dollars received through Reading First, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) mandates that schools receive professional development, use approved reading programs and assessment plans, and incorporate reading coaches as part of the program fidelity. Roehrig and her colleagues (2008) underscore the importance of utilizing progress monitoring data to inform individualized literacy instruction and conclude that reading coaches are most effective when they interact with the primary teacher and are part of a team building capacity effort. Vaughn and Coleman (2004) further stipulate that instructional decision-making is enhanced when school personnel are working together in a collaborative fashion to analyze progress monitoring data and utilizing the analyses to inform instruction. Although some researchers (Allington, 2002; Pressley, 2002) contend

that Reading First is not all inclusive of effective reading instruction, the integrated approach of using data assessment and team problem-solving to inform instructional delivery is widespread in U.S. public schools today. Nonetheless, when students are not attaining the appropriate academic benchmarks within the Reading First program, a recommendation for a more intensive program, such as Reading Recovery, may be appropriate.

Reading Recovery Instructional Approach

A second model for increasing academic reading proficiency at the elementary level is Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery (RR) is an early intervention literacy program that supplements regular classroom instruction, with an average duration ranging from 12-20 weeks. It is specifically tailored to assist the lowest performing (usually the bottom 20%) first grade students develop the necessary academic competencies in reading and writing skill sets by accelerating their progress and then helping them to achieve at an average level of performance, thereby negating the need for more restrictive programming (O'Connor & Simic, 2002). RR is specifically aligned with the student's needs and strengths throughout a seven step intervention period. The teacher serves a critical supportive role in the introduction and teaching of strategies, prompting, and progress monitoring. The Reading Recovery Council of North America (1999) has established efficacy for the program through research results that underscore that a majority of targeted school children have successfully completed the program and have been able to return to their classroom with appropriate reading and writing competencies and strategies. Additionally, a number of research studies (Askew, Kaye, Frasier, Anderson, & Rodriguez, 1999; Jagger & Simic, 1996) have demonstrated that the

effects of RR have been reliably maintained across time. This has been accomplished either through direct comparison of RR and non-RR children's reading levels on specific tests or by progress monitoring of the academic progress of former RR students in later school years. Consistent with the CST goal of educating a child in the least restrictive environment, RR intervention has been found to significantly reduce first grade retention and classification and placement in special education (Lyons & Beaver, 1995). Finally, RR was determined to reduce the literacy achievement gap between native and non-native speakers further demonstrating the positive influence the intervention has had on English-language learners (Ashdown & Simic, 2000).

Potential Limitations of Child Study Teams

Although CST have been highly advocated by state education departments and in the education literature as a viable method for student success, a number of studies have been less optimistic about their function. Specifically, several studies conclude that team based intervention models have either served as a catalyst for unwarranted special education placements or are plagued with a number of biases that result in an over identification of minority students (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; MacMillian & Lopez, 1996; Van DerHeyden, Witt, Naquin, 2003). In a study exploring bias in problem solving and the social process of CST (2003), Knotek concluded that bias and subjectivity affected the team's problem-identification and intervention stages when students were from low-SES families or were determined to have behavior problems. Knotek surmised from his data that this observation may have contributed to an over representation of African-American students in referrals and subsequent placement in special education thereby

underscoring the potential bias factor that may be inherent toward certain student minority groups.

Despite these criticisms, the implementation of collaborative CST has emerged from assisting teachers with at-risk children to a critical area of the school reform movement designed to promote positive educational student outcomes (Kovaleski & Glew, 2006). Two critical team models that have received a great deal of attention, particularly within elementary schools in Pennsylvania, have included the Instructional Support Team (IST) and the Response to Intervention model. The goal of both of these models is to assist students in acquiring greater degrees of academic skill sets within the core general education curriculum without the need to implement more restrictive measures.

Research Literature on Instructional Support Team and Response to Intervention Problem-Solving Models

Changes in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA 2004) reflect a paradigmatic shift in the provision of educational services to school children who are not responsive to the traditional modes of intervention. At the apex of these legislative changes is the belief that the overall assessment process should incorporate evidence-based, multi-tiered interventions in determining outcome data for educational decision-making (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). Several states have responded to the legislative requirements through the development and implementation of problem-solving teams. These teams often comprise additional support staff and frequently include individualized interventions on a more consistent basis. In a detailed review of several large-scale programs, Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, and Young (2003) reported on four

intervention models that adopted variations of the problem-solving team process. These include Pennsylvania's Instructional Support Teams (IST), Ohio's Intervention Based Assessment (IBA), Iowa's Building Assistance Teams (BAT), and the Problem-Solving Model (PSM) based in Minneapolis public schools. To determine program efficacy for these programs, Burns, Appleton, and Stehouwer (2005) conducted a meta-analysis and concluded that program effectiveness, as determined by significant effect size, was mediated by mixed short-term outcome data. Since the present study's focus was on examining responses to special education legislative changes in Pennsylvania, a more comprehensive review of the IST process follows as a precursor to discussing more restrictive educational programming.

Instructional Support Team Outcomes

In 1990, Instructional Support Teams (IST) were mandated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education in response to a perception of the over-identification of students as learning disabled and requiring special educational services. Specifically, Chapter 14 special education regulations required at least one elementary school in the state's eligible districts to implement an IST. The regulations further mandated IST interventions prior to the identification and placement of a student for more restrictive educational services. The IST process was designed to focus on a student's instructional, emotional, behavioral, and communication needs within the realm of the regular educational environment (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999).

The Virginia Department of Education also advocates the use of the IST as a problem-solving model designed to enhance student outcomes and foster increased professional development toward creating a problem-solving school culture (Barry,

2008). They further highlight three fundamental assumptions upon which IST is based. These include: (1) all students are learners; (2) the focus of IST is on developing an instructional match; and, (3) the development of a problem-solving culture within the school (Barry, 2008).

In Pennsylvania, the IST model was predicated upon earlier teacher assistance team models, but restructured to include modifications in both process and content. The process changes included instructional support to the classroom teacher of the chosen strategy as well as a comprehensive process of curriculum-based assessment designed to assess performance levels to formulate an accurate statement of the problem, to better understand specific instructional materials to implement, and for appropriate progress monitoring of selected strategies in determining their success (Kovaleski, 2006). Content changes included training IST personnel in academic, social, and emotional areas along with the identification of academic performance levels. Required IST composition included the referring teacher, principal, IST specialist, and other support staff such as the speech/language specialist and school psychologist. The timeframe required in Pennsylvania to determine whether the IST met established objectives or required more formal referral for an evaluation to determine special educational needs was 60 school days (Kovaleski, et al., 1999). The IST process is represented in Figure 1.

- Problem Identification based on Data and Observations
- Goal Development
- Establishment of Interventions
- Implementation of Interventions
- Continuous Progress Monitoring
- Follow-up Team Meeting to determine final disposition
(Generally 60 days)

Figure 1. Instructional support team conceptual framework.

In a relatively large-scale analysis of the outcome implications of IST in Pennsylvania, Kovalski and Glew (2006) addressed two variables: whole-school and student performance factors. Whole school factors were based on data collected from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) during the time ISTs were being developed and implemented. Based on data from 1,401 schools the IST referral rate was determined to have increased by 40% over the four year phase-in period (Hartman & Faye, 1996). Despite this rather substantial increase for pre-referral intervention, Kovalski states the actual percentage of IST referred students who were not recommended for more formal psycho-educational evaluation was stable over the four year duration and ranged from 83.3% to 85.8%. Overall, the IST based model yielded roughly one third less formal referrals to the special education process for schools that participated in its implementation. Thus, IST schools successfully assisted large numbers of students in their general education without contributing to rising costs (Kovalski & Glew, 2006).

With regard to student performance factors, Kovalski, et al. (1999) determined that academic performance increased when schools maintained rigor with IST fidelity. When IST schools were determined to have compromised program fidelity, the results were comparable to those of non-IST schools. This suggests schools need to seriously reflect on any attempt to modify interventions that may be crucial to program efficacy.

Bickel, Zigmond, and McCall (1998) examined the effects of the IST process on the prevalence of special education rates relative to students classified as learning disabled, mentally retarded, and seriously emotionally disturbed, and concluded that implementation of IST contributed to a declining trend in student placement in special

education programs. It should be noted that this observation was based on state enrollment data.

In an attempt to determine whether the positive gains of IST could be maintained over time, Rock and Zigmond (2001) studied 140 Pennsylvania students, kindergarten through fifth grade, and determined that approximately one-quarter of students formerly receiving IST accommodations were subsequently enrolled in special education programs two years following IST involvement. Rock and Zigmond note that some students may inevitably require more formalized, intensive services despite previous IST efforts. Determining the effects of long-term efficacy of the IST model is further complicated by unrelated factors. This is exemplified by Fuchs, et al. (2003) who note “this information is difficult to interpret because referral and placement numbers can be influenced by many administrative and political factors that have little to do with student performance” (p. 164).

In a study to further examine the long-term effects of the IST problem-solving model, on student performance Carney and Steifel (2008) reviewed the academic records of 32 students to describe their educational outcomes 3.5 years following IST referral. Among the four research questions identified for the study, two involved examining the need for more formalized evaluative measures: (1) What proportion of students initially referred for IST interventions received more intensive special education placement? and (2) Does the implementation of secondary-level support services (IST) inhibit or delay referral for special educational services? With respect to the first question the authors concluded that the proportion of target students receiving special education remained relatively stable (19%-21%), although a few students were noted to rotate between

various levels of intervention. As for whether special educational services were impeded through the IST process, Carney and Steifel remark that this was not directly apparent from their data, but that it is difficult to state this fact conclusively. Their data reflected that by year four, 15 of the 32 target students (47%) had been referred to the special education process (12 academic, 3 behavioral) with 5 of the 15 (33%) eventually qualifying for special educational services. Although the IST process may not have prevented more restrictive programming for every referred student, its individualized approach to intervention programming and continuous progress monitoring has clearly contributed to the schools' team building capacity and problem-solving skills. Overall, it has served as an appropriate transition to the RTI model which is being implemented in many schools in helping teams determine the most appropriate educational services/programming for children.

Response to Intervention Model

Response to Intervention is a relatively recent and innovative team problem-solving model that schools are embracing to ensure a student's needs, both academic and behavioral, are being appropriately programmed. RTI has satisfied a number of prevention and intervention needs by evaluating the success of schoolwide supports, individualized interventions, and need for special education (O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, & Bell, 2005). As educators experience disappointment with current reactive practices as well as NCLB pressures, schools are embracing RTI as a viable alternative (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2006). RTI is defined as a multi-tiered level of service delivery in which a student's academic needs are tailored to an appropriate level of evidence-based instruction that involves the total student population

(Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). As Mesmer and Mesmer (2008) suggest, the rationale of RTI is predicated upon the use of assessment data to effectively inform instructional decisions, and ultimately benefit the student. They further add that RTI represents a paradigm shift away from a sorting function to a supportive role in determining the most appropriate environment in meeting the child's needs. As Barnes and Harlacher (2008) report, RTI embodies five underlying principles gleaned from the literature base. These include: (1) a proactive and preventative approach to education; (2) ensuring an instructional alignment between a learner's skills, curriculum and instruction; (3) a problem-solving approach through continuous data tracking to inform decisions; (4) use of effective practices; and, (5) a systems-level orientation. According to Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, and Hickman (2003), RTI begins with general instruction/interventions intended for all learners that is preventative and proactive in nature (Tier I). Students not successful at this level proceed to Tier II which includes supplemental instruction involving rapid response and higher intensity. The final level (Tier III), for those students experiencing continued difficulty, involves additional or specialized instruction of longer duration (Vaughn, et al., 2003). Pennsylvania's a response to intervention framework is illustrated in Figure 2. In a recent *Reading Today* survey, 75% of distinguished literacy researchers suggest that RTI is very important to student welfare (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2008).

Burns and Ysseldyke (2005) outline five steps inclusive of RTI. These include: general classroom instructional delivery by their classroom teacher; monitoring student academic performance; differentiated instruction and/or more intensive intervention developed and implemented for those students who do not respond effectively to initial

Pennsylvania's Response to Intervention Framework

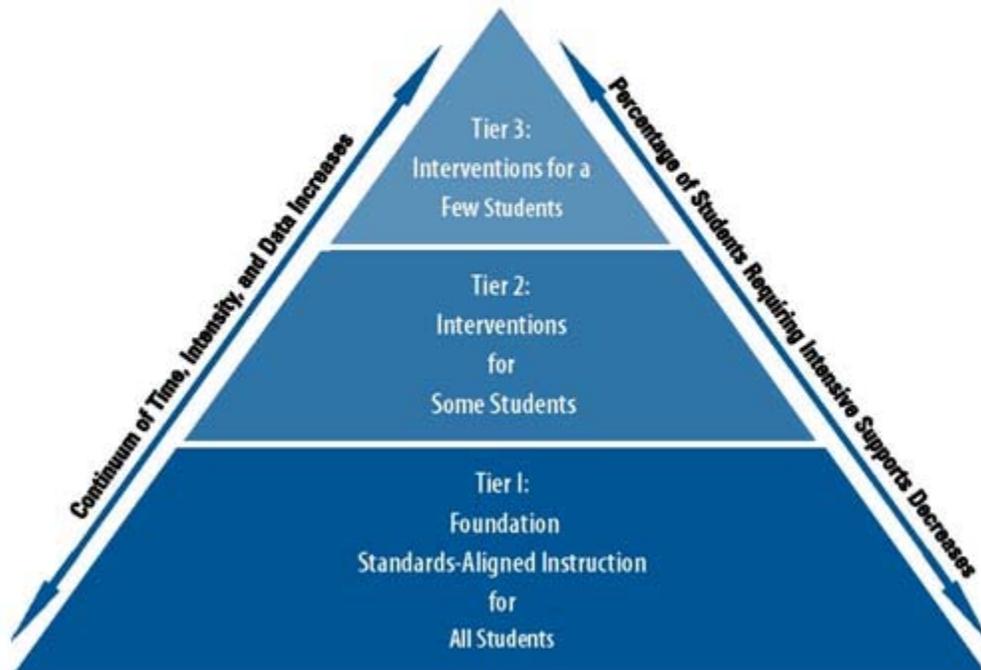


Figure 2. Pennsylvania's response to intervention framework.

classroom instruction; continuation of repeated progress monitoring to determine whether the modifications have had desirous results; and, referral to the special education process for those students who have not demonstrated an appropriate response to the intervention programming. These steps will be described next in further detail.

As Mesmer and Mesmer (2008) elaborate, the prevention process begins with schoolwide universal screenings of literacy development several times over the course of the school year to determine who may be at risk and in need of further academic assistance. The “at-risk” designation is generally conveyed when a student’s performance is significantly below benchmark comparisons. For those students who have not attained appropriate benchmark progress given their participation in general education instruction, additional scientifically valid interventions are implemented, generally within a small group format, for the purpose of increasing skill acquisition. Scientific or research-based approaches suggest that interventions have been adopted as part of research studies and found to be valid. Next, performance levels in response to the selected interventions are monitored. The continuous data monitoring represents a key component to the model and is utilized throughout the process to support future educational decisions on behalf of the student. The skill deficit that required the need for more intensive intervention planning should guide the progress monitoring toward improvement of that area of concern. Should the student continue to struggle in meeting agreed upon benchmark indicators, more intensive intervention planning and progress monitoring are implemented. This step may require the need for additional assessment to better understand a more comprehensive nature of the problem and instructional approaches most compatible to address it.

At the conclusion of this process, the RTI team, including parents, reconvenes to review all of the progress monitoring data, and to determine how to most appropriately maintain student growth rates or remediate on-going academic deficits. When a student demonstrates a lack of appropriate response to the interventions a determination for more restrictive programming is generally made. For those districts who utilize RTI as a viable identification and placement process, special education programming is typically the next step in the process. Districts using the traditional “discrepancy model” in identifying a learning disability typically recommend further evaluation before rendering a final decision for special education (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008).

Gresham, VanderHeyden, and Witt (2005) further conceptualize the fundamental components of RTI through their concise description of the interrelationships between student needs, service delivery, and program intensity. Many advocates are further advancing the RTI process to replace the traditional and frequently used discrepancy model of identifying children possessing a learning disability. The discrepancy model requires a severe disparity evidenced between a child’s intellectual ability and academic achievement (Gresham, 2001). Fuchs, et al. (2003) further comment that many professional organizations, such as the National Association of School Psychologists, have also recognized the RTI approach as an acceptable practice in programming for special needs students.

The advocacy of RTI has been widely echoed in response to four major criticisms of the more traditional discrepancy models. The first criticism includes what Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) called “waiting to fail” (p. 139) which represents prolonging supportive services until the IQ/achievement discrepancy attains the determined level of required

significance. The second objection involves the trend toward over-identifying students, particularly minorities, for special education in an effort to assist them in acquiring the services they need (Walmsley & Allington, 2007). Next, the emphasis on the IQ/achievement discrepancy has precluded understanding the effects of other factors, such as opportunity to learn, from occurring (Walmsley & Allington, 2007). Finally, as Fuchs, et al. (2003) illustrate, the establishment of a discrepancy is not relevant to positively affecting learner outcomes. That is, students with and without a discrepancy are qualitatively equal relative to their instructional literacy needs (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). This suggests that any disparity observed between intelligence and achievement is irrelevant if it is not linked to assisting the student achieve standards-based benchmarks appropriately.

In a longitudinal study of reading risk from kindergarten through third grade incorporating RTI methods, Simmons, Coyne, Kwok, McDonagh, Harn, and Kame'enui (2008) concluded that the majority of students who were identified as "at risk" at the beginning of kindergarten responded early and productively to the interventions implemented as indicated on progress monitoring measures. Overall, the researchers determined the majority of students struggling in reading were able to achieve and maintain adequate benchmark reading indicators across time through RTI program planning.

In a related study, O'Connor, Fulmer, Hearty, and Bell (2005) determined that RTI contributed to overall improvements in reading, improved reading for students who began their study in high risk categories, and a decrease in the incidence of students possessing a reading disability at the end of third grade. They further concluded that an

early and continuous intervention for students determined at risk in kindergarten through third grade improved their reading proficiency outcomes.

Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, and Francis (2006) lend increasing corroboratory evidence for the RTI model by utilizing intensive tertiary interventions with 27 students with severe reading difficulties and disabilities. This approach was demonstrated to show significant reading gains relative to decoding, fluency, and comprehension in approximately 50% of the student participants. Support for a multi-tier systems approach to intervention programming is further evidenced by the positive response of some students to Tier III interventions who had previously struggled in Tier I or Tier II.

To examine the effects of RTI on classroom behavior, Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, and Lathrop (2007) investigated how RTI intervention(s) can contribute to behavior support in two studies within the second grade. In the first study, 40% of the students who did not respond favorably to general classroom management strategies responded effectively to targeted (Tier II) intervention. For 4 out of 10 students whose behavior remained a problem, more individualized, and function-based interventions were deemed effective. The researchers concluded that an RTI approach to problematic social behavior can be logically applied with utility in the classroom environment.

Although the literature on the effectiveness of RTI to substantially enhance academic and behavioral proficiency is prolific, there remains a minority of the schoolwide population who may not respond successfully to an RTI methodology given their severe deficits. When schools encounter this situation it would appear essential for intervention teams to consider more restrictive methods, such as special educational programming, in meeting the child's academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

Research Literature and Legislation on the Special Education Process

According to Olefish (2006), RTI serves several relevant functions. For a majority of struggling students its implementation informs scientifically-based instruction that is successfully mediated within the core regular education curriculum. For others, however, it serves as a legitimate means of identifying students who may have one or more disabilities and ultimately require special education programming (Olefish, 2006). Special education is governed under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (2004). IDEA constitutes federal legislation that establishes specific educational policies and regulations to state education departments. Each state must then develop regulations and standards that reflect IDEA language to local education agencies (LEAs). It is then incumbent upon LEAs (school districts) to subsequently develop local educational guidelines and procedures for use within their special education departments for the purpose of demonstrating compliance with legislation as well as to ensure appropriate student programming. Failure to comply with federal or state legislation could result in a loss of funding (Burrell & Warboys, 2000). Special education involves four fundamental factors that are required by law and are essential to a best practice approach.

Factors Governing Special Education

Literature on the special education process is often predicated upon four grounding principles contained within the federal legislation and adopted by each state. These principles serve to guide a school district's special education process and include reference to a child's right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE), the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE), policies and procedures governing "child find," and

the identification and placement process (PDE, Chapter 14, 2008). These concepts will be briefly described next.

The belief that all children should have an appropriate opportunity to learn receives much consensus among educators, but what constitutes “adequate opportunity” receives less agreement among practicing professionals (Olefish, 2006). The right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) is a condition within the federal law that governs the rights and protections of every child with a disability, and ensures appropriate access to instructional and curricular opportunities. IDEA (2004) outlines 13 disabilities that impact FAPE and may warrant the need for special education. These include the following:

- Mental retardation;
- Deaf-blindness;
- Deafness;
- Hearing impairment;
- Speech or language impairment;
- Visual impairment;
- Emotional disturbance;
- Orthopedic impairment;
- Autism;
- Traumatic brain injury;
- Other health impairment;
- Specific learning disability; and,
- Multiple disabilities.

IDEA (2004) further requires that schools consider the setting in which students with disabilities are being educated. Defined as Least Restrictive Environment, IDEA declares that “to the maximum extent possible” students with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers. Placement in special classes or separate educational settings outside of the regular educational environment only occurs if the school team can demonstrate that the nature of a child’s disability is so severe he/she cannot achieve satisfactorily in the regular educational setting. Determination for more restrictive programming is based on the failure to appropriately learn despite supplementary aids and services within the regular educational milieu (IDEA, 2004).

In accordance with IDEA requirements, each school district is responsible for conducting public awareness activities to inform the public of its early intervention and special education programming. The public awareness effort must include developmental warning signs, such as delays and other risk factors that may suggest a disability. Additionally, each school district is required to develop a public outreach awareness system to locate and identify children thought to be eligible for special education within the district’s geographical boundaries. In the educational community this function is commonly referred to as “Child Find” and ensures that any student thought to be exceptional will be brought to the attention of the appropriate LEA to determine educational needs (22 Pa. Code, Chapter 14, 2008).

In addition to the FAPE, LRE and appropriate “child find” provisions of the law, school districts are required to establish a system of screening which may involve early intervening services. This serves to identify and screen students as part of the pre-referral process, provides peer support to teachers to assist them in working effectively

with students in the general education program, and identifies students who may need special education programming (22 Pa Code, Chapter 14, 2008). According to Chapter 14 Pennsylvania guidelines, the screening process must include screening in hearing, vision, and academic areas. It further addresses whether the student was provided with appropriate instruction in reading and math as part of the verification process as well as an assessment of student performance relative to state-approved grade level standards.

For students with behavioral concerns, a systematic observation of the student's behavior in the specific setting where such behavior is occurring must also be addressed. Repeated assessments of achievement, behavior, or both are conducted at reasonable intervals as a function of progress monitoring of the research-based interventions to determine the rate of learning and/or desired behavior change. Screening culminates with a determination as to whether the student's needs appear to exceed the ability of the regular education program to maintain the student at an appropriate instructional level (22 Title, Chapter 14, 2008). If a student's educational needs are determined to warrant more intensive programming beyond the regular education environment, the process of special education should be seriously considered.

The Evaluative Process of Chapter 14 Special Education

When students are believed to require further educational programming beyond regular education to appropriately meet their instructional needs, schools are required to begin a formal evaluative process. Chapter 14 regulations mandate that LEAs are required to notify parents or legal guardians whenever they propose to initiate an evaluation on a student. This is accomplished by issuing a permission to evaluate-consent form which outlines the concerns the school has about the student's educational

performance. A procedural safeguard notice is also provided to the parents informing them of their legal rights relative to consent, complaint procedures, and confidentiality. Parents also reserve the right to request an evaluation at any time, and the request must be in writing. Oral requests from parents to a professional employee or administrator of the school will necessitate dissemination of the permission to evaluate form within 10 calendar days of the oral request.

Following receipt of the appropriate consent form, a multi-disciplinary team (MDT), generally consisting of the child's teacher, parent, administrator, certified school psychologist, and any other relevant support staff (e.g. Title I teacher, speech/language specialist) will evaluate the student and complete the evaluation report (ER). The team will determine whether the child requires specially designed instruction because of a disability and is eligible for special education. The results of the evaluation will be combined in an ER which must be completed and provided to the parent no later than 60 calendar days after the evaluation process begins. The 60 calendar day timeline will begin on the day the signed permission to evaluate form is received by the LEA.

If the student is determined eligible for special educational services an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meeting must be convened. The IEP team, generally involving the MDT members in addition to the special education teacher, will address specific programs and services the student needs to succeed in school. This may include special accommodations to instructional delivery and curriculum, behavioral supports, transition services, and post-secondary planning. Parents are active participants in the IEP process and are subsequently required to sign

a Notice of Recommended Educational Program (NOREP) legally authorizing placement in special education to commence. Once the IEP is implemented the student's performance is continuously monitored for appropriate growth with modifications occurring at any time at the request of an IEP team member. The IEP team convenes annually for the purpose of reviewing the child's program and making relevant changes for continued educational success (22 Pa. Title, Chapter 14, 2008).

Since this study is seeking to examine factors involved in the truncated evaluative timeline, it is critical that the scope of the evaluative components be clearly understood.

Components of the Evaluation Report

In Pennsylvania, many school district special educational services and supplementary assistance are provided by local intermediate unit personnel who cover a specific geographical area. These organizations employ a number of professionals to include speech/language therapists, audiologists, vision/hearing specialists, occupational therapists, and school psychologists. When a child is referred for learning or behavioral problems it is generally the psychologist who is responsible for conducting the evaluation and completing the report. This involves a comprehensive process that requires a number of functions to include consultation, assessment, prevention/intervention programming, and outreach functions (National Association of School Psychologists, 2000). The evaluation report involves six areas with criteria for each section provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Special Education, 2008 Chapter 14 regulations. These areas include: (1) reason for referral; (2) sources of evaluation data; (3) conditions of assessment; (4) determining factors; (5) summary of findings/interpretation of evaluation results; and, (6) conclusion.

The reason for referral represents a succinct statement or a series of questions to be answered. Most importantly, the referral statement should synthesize the educational problem(s) the child is experiencing and should be written without technical jargon.

The second component, sources of evaluation data, requires the interpretation of other evaluations the school may receive. These evaluations may include former school reports, medical reports, vocational evaluations, ecological assessments related to the child's global functioning in the home setting, and any other documentation that is relevant to better understand the child and his/her presenting issues.

This section also seeks parental input in an effort to facilitate guardian participation in the evaluative process. Psychologists collect and interpret information that reflects the parent's perceptions of their child's strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Additionally, observation data will be included in this section and must be systematically conducted to yield both quantitative and qualitative results. This involves teacher observations as well as any related service provider observations (e.g. speech/language therapist). The student's physical condition to include health, vision, and hearing screening represents another essential element for inclusion. Additionally, the student's social, cultural, and adaptive behavioral factors relevant to his/her suspected disability and potential need for special education must be provided. To obtain teacher input regarding the instructional practices/services needed to support desired educational outcomes, a sub-section entitled teacher recommendations is included. Finally, section two concludes with the requirement for data relative to classroom based assessments; aptitude and achievement tests, local and/or state assessments, vocational technical

education assessment results, interests, preferences, and aptitudes (for secondary transition).

The third section of the report addresses whether the evaluation was conducted under standard conditions. This information seeks to determine the validity of the results. Specifically, it involves addressing two criteria that, if violated or ignored, may substantially compromise the assessment data. Consequently, this may impede the educational team's ability to most appropriately program for the student's educational needs. The two criteria items are posed as questions and ask: Was the assessment conducted under standard conditions? and; Was the assessment administered in the student's native language or other mode of communication?

The next component explores determining factors that may be related to the student's learning problems. Specifically, these factors examine whether there is a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math as well as noting whether there is limited English proficiency. Addressing these areas will likely require a historical examination of the child's curriculum to ensure that all of the necessary prerequisite skills have been provided and sequentially implemented during instruction (i.e. phonemic awareness, fluency, phonological processing skills/strategies etc). Pursuant to Chapter 14 guidelines (2008), a student's eligibility for special education and related services is discounted if either of the determining factors is believed to have primarily contributed to the learning deficit(s.)

Next, the summary of findings/interpretation of evaluation results is included to detail present levels of academic achievement. Here, the student's strength patterns, academic needs, communication, motor and transition activities are outlined and

thoroughly discussed. Additional information included in this section, when appropriate, includes functional and developmental needs, social/emotional functioning, and behavioral strengths and needs.

The ER concludes with the determination of eligibility and educational needs section. This section, entitled conclusions, requires a synthesis of all of the preceding information in arriving at a determination of whether the child requires more intensive educational programming, such as special education, to be successful. This section involves team consideration of any special circumstances as well as the need for specially designed instruction, any supplementary services/aids, and the identification of measurable annual goals.

It should further be mentioned that Chapter 14 legislation requires additional documentation for any student determined to have a specific learning disability (LD). This includes the provision of identifying the methodology utilized in determining the learning disability, instructional strategies used and data collected, educationally relevant medical findings, environmental variables, and a host of exclusionary rule-out factors. Given this degree of thoroughness in concert with the loss of available time, many school psychologists may find it daunting to comply with a best practice approach to evaluation, particularly if they experience a high referral base of children suspected of possessing a specific learning disability.

Evaluation Time and Placement Data

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2006) nearly 54% of children referred and subsequently placed in special education during the 2005/2006 school year were children with specific learning disabilities. By comparison, this figure

dwarfed the number/percentage of other children evaluated during the same school year and determined to have other educational disabilities. The implication of such a trend is the potential for an enormous amount of additional time devoted by professional staff in appropriately evaluating and complying with the LD criteria of the evaluation report.

In a study in Connecticut to determine how long a psychoeducational evaluation takes, Lichtenstein and Fischetti (1998) determined that total time appeared to be a highly variable factor, but the overall median, in hours, was 11.70. Direct contact with the student (testing and interviewing) accounted for only 27% of the evaluation. The researchers detailed four broad categories of data collection commonly referred to as RIOT: reviewing records; interviewing and observing; and, testing which is highly commensurate with Pennsylvania's evaluation report.

Given the reduced timeframe mandated by Chapter 14 legislation, schools with high referral caseloads may likely experience increased challenges due to the Chapter 14 changes to the evaluative process. This hypothesis was affirmed by the Connecticut study where the researchers found those districts with the highest caseloads had a significantly shorter mean total evaluation time as compared to the mean times in other districts (Lichtenstein & Fischetti, 1998). They recommended that school districts maintain adequate staffing levels, and that school psychologists develop good time management skills to ensure that other professional competencies do not get ignored.

Research Literature on Change Theory

Organizational change represents a major source of stress and has been affiliated with negative outcomes relative to an individual's behavioral, psychological, and physiological functioning (Schabracq & Cooper, 1998). Successful adjustment to change

has been associated with accelerated rates of enthusiasm for future change thus providing opportunities for growth and learning (Martin, Jones, & Callan, 2005). Conversely, Ashford (1988) suggests that a poor or inadequate adjustment to change serves as a catalyst for frustration, alienation, threatened feelings, and anxiety related to issues involving job security, status, work tasks, co-worker relations, and reporting relationships. Kotter (1995) further emphasizes that a failure of most change programs appears to result from the lack of attention to employees' psychological behavior toward organizational change.

In an effort to better understand the role of psychological climate in facilitating employee adjustment during organizational change, Martin, et al. (2005) drew from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive-phenomenological model on stress and coping theory. Psychological climate represents the employee's perceptual and experiential reciprocal relationship with the organization (Michela, Lukaszewski, & Allegrante, 1995). They hypothesized that psychological climate variables would act as coping resources and be predictive of improved adjustment during change. Results indicate that positive employee perceptions of the psychological climate were more inclined to appraise change favorably and report better adjustment with regard to high job satisfaction, psychological well-being, organizational commitment, and lower absenteeism and attrition intent.

Across their study, Martin, et al. concluded that supervisor support was a climate based resource that was associated with change appraisal and adjustment. This level of support involved the supervisor listening and providing feedback to the employee which was shown to positively influence the work environment. Likewise, self-efficacy was determined to be an effective mediator between climate variables and adjustment

indicators. Specifically, when individual's perceived themselves as possessing the confidence and abilities to cope with the demands and changes of the work environment, they demonstrated increased levels of adjustment. This is further supported by other researchers (Bandura, 1982; Judge, 1999) who assert a person's appraisal of their self-efficacy (efficacy expectancy) to successfully perform new skills plays a strong, determining role in their adjustment. This study further suggested that changing self-efficacy may prove a beneficial intervention for organizations to pursue as they seek to strengthen employee adjustment.

The Demand-Control (D-C) and the Demand-Control-Support (D-C-S) models of work stress suggest jobs with high demands and low control and support are stressful (McClenahan, Giles, & Mallett, 2007). Karasek (1979) first proposed the job-demand-control model to assist in predicting work "strain." This model incorporated two dimensions that had a direct bearing on strain: job demands and decision latitude. Job demands represent psychological stressors present in the environment (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) while decision latitude has been operationally defined as autonomy (Peeters & Rutte, 2005).

In an effort to explore this model further, Peeters and Rutte (2005) examined time management behavior as a moderator for the job-demand-control interaction. In this study the interaction effects of time management, work demands, and autonomy on burnout were investigated with 123 elementary teachers. From their study the researchers concluded teachers who experience high levels of autonomy feel less emotionally exhausted and more personally fulfilled regardless of their time management skills. Conversely, when autonomy levels were deemed low, time management

involvement resulted in less emotional exhaustion and greater feelings of personal accomplishment compared with teachers who engage in less time management. Therefore, time management served as an effective mediator for low levels of autonomy. Time management was additionally determined to compensate more significantly during periods of high work demands. This study demonstrated high work demands and low autonomy contributed to emotional exhaustion or burnout unless it can be successfully mediated through the effective use of one's time (Peeters & Rutte, 2005).

In an effort to better understand how individuals cope with the pressures of job demands and stress on the job, Johnson (1989) extended the D-C model to examine social support as an effective mediator. This model suggests that individuals who experience high demands coupled with low control and low support will experience less personal fulfillment and less job satisfaction than other employees who experience more optimal conditions (Johnson, Hall, & Theorell, 1989). Johnson further determined a three-way interaction and concluded that the combined effects of control and support served to mediate the effects of demands on well-being (Johnson, 1989; McClenahan, et al., 2007). Support was defined as the extent to which management (supervisors) was supportive of employees and encouraged employees to be supportive of one another. Although the literature field on the mediating effects of work-related stress has yielded some inconsistent findings, studies have concluded that social support on the job decreases the negative effect of stress on measures such as job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Griffith, Steptoe, & Copley, 1999). McClenahan, et al. (2007) indicate the interaction effects between demands, control and support are not as prevalent in homogenous versus multi-occupational work categories.

To explore this in greater detail McClenahan, et al. (2007) examined the effects of work demands, control and support on job satisfaction, burnout, and psychological distress on a group of university faculty. While there were no two- or three-way interactions in support of the above models of job strain, additive effects of work demands and control on psychological distress and demands and support on burn out and job satisfaction were determined. Overall, findings indicated that demands, control, and supervisory support were predictive of job strain and satisfaction in their studied group.

Summary

This literature review has provided a thorough discussion on the NCLB legislation (2001) with particular emphasis on accountability mandates required to ensure all children are achieving at appropriate benchmark indicators. Literature on child study teams and school wide interventions, such as the Reading First initiative and Reading Recovery, was presented as an early intervention effort given the implication that some children may likely experience difficulty making adequate educational gains in the regular educational curriculum. Next, a conceptual framework on team building capacity models was outlined for those students who continue to be at a more acute risk of future academic failure. Following this discussion an overview on the special education process was presented. Since the present study invariably involves practitioner response to changes governing special education procedures, Title 22 of the Pennsylvania Chapter 14 regulations was utilized as a descriptive reference throughout the process. Because consideration of placement into special education requires a comprehensive evaluation report, and given the rather significant role the evaluation report has on this investigator's study, components of the evaluation were detailed and are conveyed in accordance with

Pennsylvania state standards. This chapter concluded with a discussion of research literature on several change models that described specific mediating effects that contribute toward a better adjustment under high work demands. Since a large part of this study examined practitioner responses to regulatory and organizational change in the evaluative process it was important to utilize the aforementioned literature as a conceptual base in structuring the data collection instruments (surveys, interviews) detailed in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This case study explores how school psychologists have adjusted to the change in timeframes governing student evaluations, and what, if any, modifications to their existing work practices have they made in response to the change. This chapter includes the following components incorporated in this study: the rationale for the chosen methodology; the setting of the study; the research design; procedural methods; conceptual framework for data analysis; and, summary.

Rationale for the Chosen Methodology

Although the research literature includes a plethora of studies that have examined professional response to policy change through quantitative design methods, the investigator chose a qualitative methodology in order to be able to expand on emergent themes emanating from the in-depth interview process and focus group discussions derived from school psychologists and special education supervisors as they convey work practice adaptations from recent policy change. As noted in the literature, credible qualitative dissertations reflect a number of positive attributes to include their ability to pose a broad question, supply information rich data, analyze data to acquire an insider's ("emic") understanding of phenomenon, and theorize about the meaning of the investigation (Biklen & Casella, 2007).

Qualitative research is predicated on the belief that much information cannot merely be reduced to a set of measurable data, but rather involves a dynamic social context where phenomena are explicated as a complex, interrelated whole. The social

context of school psychologists varies considerably depending upon the work priorities imposed by their supervisory and administrative staff. For this reason, adjustment to policy change may take multiple forms, and have very unique outcomes depending on diversity of assignment and location. Hatch (2002) further indicates that qualitative methods and data involve detailed descriptions related to the social context they represent. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding multiple realities that are experientially constructed from diverse backgrounds in acquiring insight into “reality” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Understanding how individuals construct meaning from experience and relate to their social environment fulfills the criteria for an interpretive qualitative design (Merriam, 2002).

This study seeks to interpret changed professional practices among school psychologists during the first school year of the revised special education (Chapter 14) regulations governing timeframes for student evaluations. This interpretation is designed to acquire insight into individual and organizational adaptation to educational policy change.

In conducting interpretive qualitative research, the researcher adheres to the interpretive analysis model in applying meaning to data. The researcher serves as mediator in this process, continually linking data (i.e. events, objects, and experiences) to meaning in relationship to the social context (Hatch, 2002). Interpretation, in essence, is about providing meaning to the data (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 1990). It involves an understanding of social situations by formulating explanations for what has transpired within them. Further, it subsumes making inferences, developing insights, applying

significance, refining understandings, drawing conclusions, and extrapolating lessons learned (LeCompt & Schensul, 1999; Patton, 1990).

One ideal research design methodology that involves the integration of the researcher, participants, and social context is the case study. A distinct advantage of a case study approach is it affords the researcher an opportunity to demonstrate the way multiple factors coalesce to reveal the uniqueness of the phenomena under investigation (Thomas, 2003). A case study typically involves the examination of individuals, groups, organizations, or events. Case studies seek to provide description of a phenomenon, and frequently attempt to avail insights about the nature of an entity's action (Thomas, 2003). Other advantages of a case study include the provision of rich contextual detail that is co-constructed with the participants as part of the research process, unique symbolic representation, and ample recollections of participant voices that enable the reader to empathize with the study.

These characteristics lend themselves favorably to this study as it seeks to examine the process school psychologists undergo in adapting to the reduction of available time allocated for the completion of student evaluations. It is quite possible that some psychologists may convey positive outcomes in the reduction in time while other psychologists may encounter problematic scenarios that are more likely to be observed in various circumstances. By examining the idiosyncrasies of the individual in relation to his/her specific social context, the researcher may be in an advantageous position to identify unique patterns and trends under various conditions. This may serve to foster effective work practices for other professionals who find themselves in similar situations

Qualitative research always involves the researcher as the primary data collection instrument (Hatch, 2002). The human instrument serves as the logical means for acquiring and analyzing data given the goal of translating information into deep meaning.

Data collection sources are vital to case study interpretation. Yin (2003) underscores the value of multiple data sources when conducting a case study. He emphasizes the need to “triangulate” or acquire converging lines of evidence to establish robust findings and conclusions. He describes this goal as the main idea when collecting case study data. He suggests that when two or more independent sources all converge to a prominent trend or pattern, optimal convergence has occurred. In addition to questionnaires in carrying out survey studies, open-ended interviews with key informants, and the utilization of focus groups represent excellent sources of data in acquiring meaning and addressing specific research questions (Yin, 2003). Since the mid-1990s, in-depth interviewing has taken on increasing credibility with respect to knowing and meaning within the educational research field (Dilley, 2004).

Seidman (2006) states that one of the most productive ways a researcher can examine an educational institution or process is through the experience of the people who compose the organization. He states: “interviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a line of inquiry for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior” (p. 10). The underlying purpose involved in conducting in-depth interviews is achieving a profound understanding of a lived experience by others and what that experience has come to represent (Seidman, 2006). Interview data are frequently analyzed through narrative transformation. Thomas (2003) emphasizes several advantages when using interviewing as a primary data collection instrument over

the more traditional mail survey. These include providing the researcher with greater autonomy and flexibility, better rapport in eliciting a participant's genuine response(s), and greater efficiency in gathering data regarding an individual's personal opinions and inherent knowledge of the subject matter.

Where Seidman adopts a phenomenological approach to interviewing, Rubin and Rubin, in *Qualitative Interviewing* (1995), place primary importance on a researcher's epistemological roots, or being exceptionally sensitive to recognizing data. They emphasize a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the subject of the research where conveying and comprehending information is achieved. Furthermore, they outline three characteristics to their learning philosophy: first, individuals describe their perceptions and experiences to arrive at meaning; next, a set of mutual agreements occur between interviewer and interviewee; and third, the philosophy assists in developing criteria for evaluating the quality of the research, the ethical treatment of the relationship and the comprehensiveness of the narrative document. The outcome of qualitative interviewing is knowledge that is predicated upon situational and conditional factors, and provides the opportunity to understand experiences and reconstruct events from a secondary perspective (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Kvale (1996) refers to interviewing as a craft that relies on the judgments of the researcher. He provides a six step method of analysis to arrive at meaning. They include: collecting the subjects' information; allowing for the individuals' self-discovery; consolidating and interpreting the interview event; interpreting the transcribed interview by the researcher; conducting follow-up interviews; and, observing the interviewees to determine if their behavior has changed as a result of the insights they

made as research participants. According to Kvale, the art of crafting meaning and arriving at insightful implications and knowledge requires the researcher to go beyond what is said in text. He/she must stand at a distance from verbal narrative, which is obtained by a theoretical stance, and recontextualize content in a specific conceptual context.

Hatch (2002) indicates educational research paradigms have begun to draw upon focus group interviews in their attempt to supplement other qualitative data. He notes that focus group data is typically collected as a secondary source that has added utility in enriching the overall data sets of qualitative studies. Hatch further notes that focus groups serve as a valuable means of research triangulation by collecting data on the same phenomenon from a variety of sources.

Morgan (1997) states the strength of the focus group is in its ability to utilize the group interaction process to arrive at insights and meaning that would otherwise be difficult to achieve without the dynamic interaction that occurs within a group. The primary advantage of a focus group is that it enables the researcher to obtain concentrated data in a relatively short period of time (Hatch, 2002). Additional advantages of focus group interviewing include the potential for participants to openly express their opinions as well as giving the participants some control of the interview process and direction (Hatch, 2002). Focus groups are most appropriately suited for studies that involve exploratory or explanatory social phenomenon in which participants use dialogue to examine a topic in great depth (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Overall, it is incumbent upon the researcher to approach both individual and focus group interviews

with a heightened consciousness of pre-planning in order to maximize the advantages of these methods to best align with the phenomenon under investigation.

Within the available research paradigms of qualitative design, studies that incorporate elements of the constructivist and post-positivist model make use of emergent patterns, themes, and detailed narratives as a means of discovering meaning, while positivist models rely exclusively on objective reality sought through facts and laws (Cresswell, 1998).

In this study the conceptual framework is predicated upon an adapted grounded theory format that is further elucidated by the following qualitative tenets of Cresswell (1998): theoretical ideas are deferred in order to permit a substantive theory to emerge; theory involves how individuals interact relative to the phenomenon under study; theory is derived from data attained through fieldwork interviews, observations, and documents; data analysis is systematic and begins as soon as data is available; data analysis involves connecting themes and identifying categorical information, further data collection revolves around emerging concepts; and the developed theory can be reported in a narrative framework. A grounded typology represents a categorical system that a researcher derives as a result of analyzing information as opposed to adopting another researcher's typology or pre-determined theoretical model (Thomas, 2003).

Interviews based on guiding criteria developed by Seidman (2006) will be conducted with school psychologists and supervisors of special education to explore the specific elements of this case study. Several applied criteria include the selection of participants, qualitative techniques involving specific fundamental skills, respect for the relationship process and analyzing, interpreting and sharing information. This case

study's findings are based on the triangulation of three data sources (questionnaire, individual interviews from two distinct but related pools, and focus group discussions). Yin (1994) reaffirms the value of collective data and cautions against relying too heavily on a narrow evidentiary foundation. Case studies center around logical inferences (analytic generalization) versus statistical generalization made on the basis of substantive issues or topics of interest (Yin, 1994). The triangulation of data yielded from multiple sources in examining the responses of changed educational policy are commensurate with Yin's convergence principle, and will serve as a foundation during Chapter Five discussion.

Setting of the Study

The case study took place across a large region of South-central Pennsylvania. This region comprises a 2,194 square mile area that is largely served by the Lincoln Intermediate Unit #12 (LIU). LIU contractually serves 25 school districts and 2 technical schools in Adams, Franklin, and York counties. In addition to those schools serviced by the LIU, a large metropolitan school district in Dauphin County opted to participate in this study as well. Only school psychologists and special education supervisors were part of this study because the evaluative timeframe changes were believed to have most affected their professional practice(s). A distribution of professional personnel and schools, by county, is provided in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

Table 1

Composition of Personnel, by County, Participating in this Study

County	School Psychologists	Special Education Supervisors
Adams	13	2
Franklin	8	2
York	24	2
Dauphin	6	1

Table 2

Composition of Schools, by County, Supported by Study Participants

County	Elementary	Middle	High School	Total
Adams	14	6	6	26
Franklin	27	6	6	39
York	63	16	14	93
Dauphin*	13	4	2	19
Total	117	32	28	177

Note. *Dauphin County comprised one school district.

Research Design

Questionnaire Pool

At the onset of this study, a 5 to 10 minute questionnaire was administered to 55 school psychologists currently employed by the Lincoln Intermediate Unit #12. The questionnaire was additionally administered to those school psychologists employed by several other area school districts who had elected to participate in this study. The questionnaire was administered at each of the intermediate units' main county offices for IU psychologists, and at the primary work location for district employed psychologists. Psychologists from each of the four counties were represented in this study. The participants were made aware of the purpose and rationale of this study by the primary investigator. The questionnaire which assisted in addressing this study's research questions follow. For each question the participant responds according to four choices: "Always;" "Frequently;" "Sometimes;" and, "Never."

1. When selecting a test for an evaluation, brevity of administration is the most important consideration.
2. Evaluation reports are less effective in addressing student referral questions than in previous school years.
3. I have chosen to forego professional development opportunities due to timeframe constraints imposed by the 60 day modification mandate.
4. The revised timeframe for evaluations has served to decrease communications with parents and teachers.
5. The 60 school to calendar day revision has necessitated additional work in my evenings and/or weekends.

6. The evaluation report has been less detailed in addressing student problems/needs as a result of a truncated timeframe.
7. The multi-disciplinary team struggles in meeting with parents to discuss the evaluation results and recommendations within the prescribed 60 calendar day period.
8. My district has sub-contracted for additional time in meeting evaluative requirements.
9. The 60 calendar day mandate for evaluations has impeded the execution of other job related duties during the contractual day.
10. My team has struggled in developing successful educational practices in response to the timeframe change.
11. I have reduced the time required to evaluate a student (including observations) as a result of Chapter 14 changes.

Interview Pool

The interview pool included 10 full-time school psychologists from all three counties served by the LIU. Only those psychologists who were directly responsible for student evaluations within their district, and have three or more years of professional practice were eligible to participate in an interview. These parameters were intended to collect information rich data from experienced practitioners who experience the reality of a referral base. The selected psychologists participated in a 60 minute in-depth individual interview at the participants' work location. Psychologists with less than three years experience, support staff, and other itinerant professionals (i.e. audiologists, speech/language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists) responsible for

either direct instruction or ancillary support of the student's education were not eligible to participate.

Method of Subject Selection

All of the school psychologists interviewed were purposely chosen from all three counties served by the LIU. Participants were selected to ensure geographical proportion across counties. Participants were further selected based upon years of experience and work-related duties involving student referrals and evaluations. Specifically, experienced psychologists whose school district assignment comprised a moderate to heavy referral caseload were given serious inclusion as study participants.

Administrator Pool

The administrator interview sample consisted of seven special education supervisors who were purposefully selected based on site approvals received, and work experience. All of the selected supervisors were invited to participate in an individual in-depth interview lasting 60 to 75 minutes in duration at the participants' work location. A description of the interview questions follows:

1. How has the timeframe change governing student evaluations affected your practice?
2. What factors facilitated and/or impeded compliance with the mandated change?
3. To what extent has the change in evaluation time contributed to additional work beyond the contractual school day?

4. Reflecting on the changes in response to Chapter 14 revisions, what concerns do you currently have regarding the amount of time required for student evaluations?
5. Have your perceptions changed during the course of the school year relative to the amount of time required for evaluations and, if so, how?
6. To what extent has the evaluative process been strengthened or weakened by the revised time mandate?
7. What are your perceptions regarding the quality of the evaluation report in response to the change in comparison to previous school years?
8. What formal or informal policies have been instituted since July, 2008 to assist a smooth adjustment resulting from the timeframe change?
9. What do you believe would represent an unreasonable timeframe imposed by state or federal authorities for the completion of student evaluations?
10. Explain the role you serve as part of the evaluative process, and what percentage of time this requires relative to your overall professional duties.

The Psychologist Focus Group Pool

The psychologist focus group pool consisted of three to seven practicing school psychologists assigned to suburban and rural school districts represented in this study.

Method of Subject Selection

All of the school psychologists participating in the focus group interviews were purposely chosen based upon their experience, uniqueness of assignment, patterns of responding on the questionnaire, or a combination of these factors.

Pool Size

Three to seven practicing school psychologists were collectively interviewed at one of the three county offices of the LIU or at a chosen district location. The focus group interview was conducted over a 60 minute period. Focus group interview questions were consistent with the individual interview questions conducted with the psychologists and special education supervisors. The purpose of the focus group was to acquire a deeper perspective on the interview questions which serve to address the four primary research questions of this study:

1. How does the restricted timeframe governing student evaluations affect the quality of evaluation reports in the South-central public school districts of this study?
2. How does the regulatory change influence compliance rates?
3. To what extent has the reduced timeframe contributed to additional work beyond the contractual work day in response to the mandated regulatory changes?
4. What practices have school psychologists and other school leaders implemented or changed, including professional development activities, in fulfilling their responsibilities as it relates to student evaluations?

The questionnaire and interview questions are aligned to the specific research questions of this study, and are presented in Table 3 to assist with clarification.

Table 3

Research Question Alignment to Questionnaire and Interview Items

Question	Items
How does the restricted timeframe governing student evaluations affect the quality of evaluation reports in the South-central public school districts of this study?	Survey Items: 1, 2, 6, 11 Interview Items: 4, 6, 7
How does the regulatory change influence compliance rates:	Survey Items: 7, 8, 9 Interview Items: 2, 4, 5, 6
To what extent has the reduced timeframe contributed to additional work beyond the contractual work day in response to the mandated regulatory changes?	Survey Item: 5 Interview Items: 3, 4, 9
What practices have school psychologists and other school leaders implemented or changed in fulfilling their responsibilities as it relates to student evaluations?	Survey Items: 3, 4, 8, 10 Interview Items: 1, 8, 10

Procedural Methods

Questionnaire and Interviews

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the principal investigator obtained permission from the LIU Director of Pupil Personnel services to administer a questionnaire to I.U. employed school psychologists. Additionally, site approval was obtained from superintendents to invite district employed psychologists to participate in the questionnaire process. The investigator obtained a list of all eligible school psychologists from the I.U. pupil personnel database. An invitation to participate in the questionnaire process was addressed by the primary investigator at the end of a pre-designated professional development or regional meeting. Information disclosed to psychologists included a cover letter explaining the purpose and relevancy of the study, title, confidentiality protections, and the voluntary nature of their participation. District employed school psychologists were invited to participate in the questionnaire process via email transmission. The invitation was accompanied by a cover letter outlining the same information previously listed.

Next, an invitation to participate in an in-depth interview was emailed to 10 school psychologists and 7 special education supervisor participants at their school addresses. The invitation included a consent form along with a copy of the cover letter which contained the purpose and significance of the study, title, confidentiality assurances, and the voluntary nature of study participants. All information disclosed was in accordance with IRB requirements. Consent forms were returned to the investigator at the participant's school location prior to beginning the interviews. Follow-up invitations

were made by telephone and through email transmissions by the investigator at 2 week and 30 day intervals.

As a final component of data collection, the principal investigator conducted focus group interviews with intermediate and district employed psychologists utilizing the same interview questions as the in-depth individual interview. A cover letter and voluntary consent form to participate in focus group interviews were emailed to participant psychologists. The consent form was returned to the investigator at the psychologist's work location prior to beginning focus group discussions.

Typological Analysis Framework

To assist with the organization and analysis of the data a typological analysis model was used. A typological analytic framework was predicated on examining the whole phenomenon under question and disaggregating data sets based on some predetermined authoritative categories. The authoritative categories for this study involve the research questions which were addressed through the alignment of data across the survey, individual, and focus group interviews. This analysis was applied in determining common connective themes among the study participants' responses in providing a greater degree of credibility for the study. Typological strategies were noted to lend themselves favorably in analyzing data from interview and focus group studies. Hatch (2002) acknowledged the appropriateness of a typological model in presenting and analyzing data from interview and focus group respondents which were utilized for this study and involved the following seven step process:

1. Identify typologies to be analyzed. Since the purpose of this study was to elicit the perspectives of a group of individuals around adjustment factors

related to evaluative timeframe constraints, the investigator used the following research questions as typologies for further analysis. The parenthetical coding represents the typological area ascribed.

- a. How, if at all, does the truncated timeframe governing student evaluations affect the quality of evaluation reports? (Coded evaluation quality.)
 - b. How, if at all, does the change influence compliance rates? (Coded compliance rate.)
 - c. To what extent, if any, has the reduced timeframe contributed to additional work beyond the contractual work day? (Coded additional work.)
 - d. What, if any, policies/practices have school psychologists and other school leaders implemented or changed in fulfilling their responsibilities as they relate to student evaluations? (Coded changed practices/policies.)
2. Read the data, marking entries related to each typology. Interview and focus group data sets were read completely with one typology in mind. This process occurred for each successive typology. Data markings and entries were subsequently made with various color codes in each area where evidence related to the typology was found. This process was undertaken with asking one fundamental question: Does this information relate to my typology?
 3. Read entries by typology, recording the main idea. At this point information was processed within each typology. This was accomplished by rereading the

data sets looking for information that specifically related to each of the typologies identified. This process was facilitated by creating a summary sheet for each participant with a brief statement of the main idea of the excerpt written on the summary sheet. This served as a quick reference back to the original data as analysis continued.

4. Look for patterns and themes within typologies. Patterns were represented with a defining recurring feature such as similarity (things happening the same way), frequency (happening seldom or often), sequence (happening in a certain order), or correspondence (happening in relation to other events). Likewise, themes represented some level of integrating concepts such as statements of meaning that were embedded within the data. Themes were identified by asking what broad statements can be made that lend credibility to the data? Patterns and themes were marked within each typology and for later analysis.
5. Decide if the patterns identified are supported by the data. Once the data were read and typologies re-read, coded judgments were made about the relevance of the data aligning with the identified typologies. Judgments were based on how well the coded data fit into the typologies discussed. Any contradictory data was explored for further analysis in an effort to identify other factors that may better contribute to understanding the phenomenon in question.
6. Write patterns as one-sentence generalizations. Once the data were read across and within each typology a series of one-sentence generalizations were made. These generalizations represented statements that expressed

relationships found in the particular contexts for this study. This step served to better organize the data into a form to be shared with others as well as in providing closure to the analyses. Generalizations were made to synthesize the study while allowing for sub-generalizations to further expand upon the relevant observations made.

7. Select data excerpts that support your generalization. This final step involves going back to the data sets and selecting compelling excerpts that support the generalizations for the purpose of making the context active and interesting. For the purpose of this study, a color-coded asterisk was placed in the protocols of the participant excerpts for later retrieval. Since there were only two pools of participants (psychologists and special education supervisors), this strategy was effective for the investigator.

The use of multiple data sources in a case study design enabled the researcher a variety of vantage points to derive corroboratory themes and develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2003). Multiple data sources that yield consistent findings reinforce the validity or “trustworthiness” of the study and provide additional evidence of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2003).

Summary

This chapter has discussed the design of the study with particular emphasis on the rationale for the chosen methodology, the setting of the study, the research design, procedural methods, and conceptual framework for analysis. Although qualitative research in education often entails extensive fieldwork to examine broad historical, curricular, and behavioral trends, the advantage of this study was based on its in-depth

narrow focus of the phenomenon in question. Such an approach lends itself more favorably to a better understanding of the findings in relation to the research questions, and serves as a potential catalyst for stimulating on-going professional discourse among the special education field.

While the design and methodology of this study seeks to examine and clarify practitioner perceptions from a qualitative perspective, its findings and conclusions may contribute to future studies that involve multiple research designs in subsequent years. The merit of this study was predicated upon the use of multiple data sources among a group of highly specialized educators to obtain a high degree of convergence intended to examine work practices in response to systemic educational policy change. This will initially be accomplished by studying the data sets closely for preliminary trends and patterns within each group of participants in Chapter IV, and presenting this information as an appropriate transition to the more integrated analysis which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter V.

CHAPTER IV
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Contextual Background

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze how school psychologists have adjusted to the change in timeframes governing student evaluations in response to Chapter 14 legislation, and what, if any, modifications to their existing work practices they have made in response to the change. This study included a purposive sample of participants across four counties in South-central Pennsylvania. This analysis presents multiple sources of information to include survey data administered to both intermediate unit and district employed psychologists, data derived from an open-ended individual interview process with school psychologists and supervisors of special education, and focus group interview data with school psychologists utilizing an open-ended format.

Each participant's insights, perspectives, concerns, and beliefs were analyzed using a methodological framework that strengthens the credibility of the findings through recurring themes and patterns of the data sets. Each questionnaire and interview item was selected to explore a specific element of adjustment given the nature of the participant's work related duties and functions. One fundamental research goal was to elicit participants' responses based upon their own unique set of working conditions and circumstances (context factors) as the investigator sought to address the research questions. This involved examining their perceptions of change as it pertained to their individual work approach toward the evaluative process as well as their perceptions of organizational changes that have been made in response to the timeframe change. While the questionnaire provided helpful insight in determining whether the timeframe change

was an issue, the individual interviews and focus group discussions served to provide the investigator with a more detailed and enriched perspective of participant experiences and their reactions to the change. Focus group participants were purposefully chosen based on the information they conveyed to either the Pennsylvania Department of Education regarding the proposed timeframe changes, or recommendations they have proposed to their school organizations. The psychologists comprising the focus groups were separate from those psychologists who were individually interviewed. Psychologists who participated in individual interviews were chosen based on such factors as years of work experience, nature of school assignment, and survey responses that were consistent with exploring this study's purpose.

In December of 2005, the Pennsylvania Department of Education outlined specific compliance and monitoring objectives in their Statewide Performance Plan for school years 2005-2010. Although target rates for evaluation timeframe compliance have been set at 100%, a review of the 2005/2006 school year indicated that Pennsylvania has obtained an overall compliance rate of 94.35%. The most common reported issues involved delays focused on sporadic caseload variations among evaluation personnel, unusual volume, or additional time required to evaluate complex evaluation reports. A very small number of school districts reported significantly less than 100% compliance with timeframes which required further monitoring from the Bureau of Special Education. While improvement activities and corrective actions have been established to assist districts achieve 100% timeframe compliance the shift from 60 school to calendar day regulation may likely require a re-evaluation of the statewide benchmark initiatives.

By exploring the districts' evaluative process with those individuals charged with complying with the statewide objectives, critical elements of adjustment were observed in the individual and focus group interviews with school psychologists and special education supervisors. Such observations serve to illustrate the challenges that school districts encounter as they seek to adhere to an externally imposed accountability system. The participants' accounts of their experiences throughout the 2008/2009 school year help to better understand how and why they have made both individual and organizational changes in the evaluative process.

The subsequent sections present the data and preliminary analysis from the survey, along with sample responses from the individual interviews with the school psychologists and special education supervisors. It will also provide sample responses from the three focus group interviews conducted with psychologists. These data will be integrated utilizing the typological framework discussed in Chapter III.

School Psychologist Responses to the Questionnaire

The survey data will be presented first, with each item's responses expressed as a percentage below the item's content. This will be followed by an initial analysis of what the data suggest independent of the interview and focus group sources to provide the reader with a general understanding of any preliminary evolving trends reported by the participating school psychologists. For the purpose of the survey, 48 participants read 11 items and responded according to the frequency (always, frequently, sometimes, and never) believed to most accurately represent each item. It should also be noted that this survey was administered toward the end of the 2008/2009 school year to allow participants the majority of the year to experience the change and share their perceptions.

Item 1:

When selecting a test for an evaluation, brevity of administration is the most important consideration.

None of the 48 psychologists responded that this is always true, while only 4 (8%) responded that it occurs frequently. Twenty-seven (56%) psychologists responded that brevity of administration is true sometimes, and 17 (36%) reported that this never occurs. Taken collectively, 92% of the psychologists' responses indicate that they have not opted to look for abbreviated batteries or screening instruments to supplant the comprehensive assessment they are currently providing to their students. This observation will become more interesting when respondents begin to discuss the scope of the evaluation conducted.

Item 2:

Evaluation reports are less effective in addressing student referral questions than in previous school years.

Nine psychologists (18.75%) responded to this item as true always, while nine other respondents (18.75%) reported that this occurs frequently. Twenty-one respondents (43.75%) reported that evaluation reports are less effective in addressing the referral question only sometimes while nine others (18.75%) indicated that this never occurs. Although 37.50% of the reporting field strongly indicate that reports are less effective in addressing the referral question than in previous school years, the consistent distribution of responses across all frequency categories suggest that context and the nature of one's work-related duties may be important determinants of their perceptions.

Item 3:

I have chosen to forego professional development opportunities due to timeframe constraints imposed by Chapter 14 timeframe revisions.

On this item 4 psychologists (8%) responded that the timeframe constraint has always resulted in them foregoing professional development opportunities while 14 (29%) reported that they frequently forego professional development trainings. Twenty respondents (42%) reported that they sometimes forego professional development while 10 other respondents (21%) reported that they never forego professional development opportunities. The responses to this item suggests that many professionals are choosing to sacrifice professional training opportunities as a result of the time constraint. The remainder of the respondents reported that the reduction in time did not appear to hinder their decision to attend professional trainings or impeded them marginally.

Item 4:

The revised timeframe for evaluations has served to decrease communications with parents and teachers.

Two psychologists (4%) reported this as always true while another 12 psychologists (25%) reported that decreased communications occurs frequently as a result of the timeframe change. Twenty-four psychologists (50%) reported that there communications with parents and teachers has been reduced sometimes while 10 respondents (21%) indicate that their communications is never impaired by time. These data suggest that the majority of school psychologists have not chosen to allow time allocations to substantially limit their communications with relevant constituencies.

Nonetheless, 29% of the respondents have reported a reduction of consultative time with parents and teachers as a result of the change.

Item 5:

The 60 school day revision has necessitated additional work in my evenings and/or weekends.

Thirteen psychologists (27%) responded always to this item while another 22 psychologists (46%) responded “frequently.” Eight psychologists (17%) responded that they “sometimes” work more in the evenings/weekends as a result of the timeframe change while five respondents (10%) reported that the change did not require any additional work. Responses to this item indicate that the majority of psychologists (73%) are working beyond what they typically would have given the change in timeframe for evaluation completion. Determining the nature of the additional work performed will be a matter of later analysis of the interview data sources.

Item 6:

The evaluation report has been less detailed in addressing student problems/needs as a result of a truncated timeframe.

Only one respondent (2%) reported “always” on this item while another 15 psychologists (31%) answered “frequently.” Twenty-two psychologists (46%) remarked that the reduced timeframe has resulted in the evaluation report being less detailed as “sometimes” while 10 other respondents (21%) reported on this item with “never.” Preliminary analysis of this item is difficult to discern given the even distribution of responses observed across three of the categories. Interview data will provide more

enriched elaboration on why some believe that the report has been less detailed while others perceive the situation as generally unchanged.

Item 7:

The multi-disciplinary team struggles in meeting with parents to discuss the evaluation results and recommendations within the prescribed 60 calendar day period.

Thirteen psychologists (27%) responded “always” to this item while 22 additional psychologists (46%) answered “frequently.” Seven respondents (14%) remarked that they “sometimes” struggle in meeting within required timeframes while another six respondents (13%) reported that they “never” struggle in meeting with parents on time. The responses to this item suggest that an overwhelming number of psychologists (73%) report difficulty meeting with parents given the 60 calendar day limit. It should be noted that while this item ascertains a team’s difficulty in meeting in a prescribed timeframe, it cannot be assumed that the struggle or difficulty resulted in non-compliance. This level of analysis will be addressed during the review of interview and focus group content.

Item 8:

My district has sub-contracted for additional time in meeting evaluative requirements.

Only one respondent (2%) indicated that this is “always” true while four respondents (8%) reported that sub-contracting additional time has been observed “frequently.” Ten psychologists (21%) endorsed that sub-contracting occurs “sometimes” while 33 psychologists (69%) report that this “never” occurs. This item is intended to tap a district’s effort in achieving a 100% compliance rate within the

timeframe regulation. The fact that 90% of the respondents indicate sub-contracting as occurring only sometimes or never suggests that this practice is not heavily relied on as a strategy in offsetting non-compliance within the prescribed timeframe. Instead, it appears that psychologists are responsible for all of the evaluations within their respective assignments.

Item 9:

The 60 calendar day mandate for evaluations has impeded the execution of other job related duties during the contractual day.

Sixteen psychologists (33.33%) remarked that this statement is true “always” while 16 other psychologists (33.33%) remarked this as “frequently” accurate. Fourteen respondents (29.17%) indicated this as occurring sometimes while two respondents (4.17%) reported that their other job related duties are “never” impeded in response to the change in timeframes. Responses to this item indicate that two-thirds (66%) of practitioners perceive other job competencies being compromised as a result of the reduced time allocated for student evaluations.

Item 10:

My team has struggled in developing successful educational practices in response to the timeframe change.

Five psychologists (10%) responded “always” to this item with an additional 15 psychologists (31%) responding “frequently.” Twenty respondents (42%) remarked that their team “sometimes” struggles in developing successful practices due to the reduction in evaluative time while eight respondents (17%) acknowledge that their respective school-based teams “never” struggle in developing successful practices. These data tend

to suggest that many psychologists generally perceive school personnel, including themselves, as experiencing problems transitioning to the revised time mandate.

Item 11:

I have reduced the time required to evaluate each student (including observations) as a result of Chapter 14 changes.

Two psychologists (4%) responded “always” to this item while another 14 psychologists (29%) responded “frequently.” Nineteen respondents (40%) indicated that Chapter 14 changes have “sometimes” resulted in a reduction in time to evaluate each student while thirteen respondents (27%) remarked that the regulation change has “never” forced them to reduce their time for evaluations. Responses from this item suggest that two-thirds of practitioners (67%) have not generally responded to the timeframe change through a reduction in evaluative time while one-third of the psychologists (33%) seem to suggest otherwise. This is another item that may best be understood from an integration of interview data.

The above data suggest that the timeframe change has had a rather major impact with school psychologists across several domains. Most notably, the percentage of psychologists reporting additional work required in their off-duty hours indicates a substantial increase (more than 7 out of 10). A similar frequency is observed on items seven and nine which relate to teams struggling to convene with parents on time to review evaluative results and recommendations (73%) as well as other critical functions being impeded in response to reduced time allocations for evaluations (two-thirds of the respondents.) Two other trends extrapolated from the survey data indicate that psychologists are not utilizing brevity as a criterion for the selection of their instruments

(92% reported only sometimes or never), and districts are not sub-contracting out for additional services to help compensate for evaluative back-logs (90% reported sometimes or never). In an effort to provide a concise overview of the survey data the reader is provided with a matrix as reported by the 48 school psychologists. Table 4 represents a compilation of scores derived from 48 school psychologists from South-central Pennsylvania. Although district employed psychologists have been included in the data collection the majority of respondents are LIU employed psychologists. Please note the numbers are reported as percentages.

The subsequent section provides a brief analysis and sampling of interview responses that relate, in part, to the survey data. These responses will be presented for each of the 10 interview questions, and were chosen for the common elements they share across the majority of psychologists. As such, they represent evolving patterns and themes which serve to provide additional credibility to the overall study. In all, 10 psychologists were interviewed. They were selected based on either their responses to the survey data or their years of experience within the field which is believed to contribute to the purpose of this study.

Table 4

Survey Results

	A	F	S	N
When selecting a test for an evaluation, brevity of administration is the most important consideration	0	8	56	36
Evaluation reports are less effective in addressing student referral questions than in previous school years	19	19	44	18
I have chosen to forego professional development opportunities due to timeframe constraints imposed by Chapter 14 timeframe revisions	8	29	42	21
The revised timeframe for evaluations has served to decrease communications with parents and teachers	4	25	50	21
The 60 school to calendar day revision had necessitated additional work in my evenings and/or weekends	27	46	17	10
The evaluation report has been less detailed in addressing student problems/needs as a result of a truncated timeframe	2	31	46	21
The multi-disciplinary team struggles in meeting with parents to discuss the evaluation results and recommendations within the prescribed 60 calendar day period	27	46	14	13
My district has sub-contracted for additional time in meeting evaluation requirements	2	8	21	69
The 60 calendar day mandate for evaluations has impeded the execution of other job related duties during the contractual day	33	34	29	4

Table 4 (continued)

Survey Results

	A	F	S	N
My team has struggled in developing successful educational practices in response to the timeframe change	10	31	42	17
I have reduced the time required to evaluate each student (including observations) as a result of Chapter 14 changes	4	29	40	27

Note. A = Always; F = Frequently; S = Sometimes; N = Never.

Psychologists' Responses to In-Depth Interviews

Interview Question 1:

How has the timeframe change governing student evaluations affected your practice?

Seventy percent of the interviewed psychologists responded that the change in the evaluative timeframe has resulted in additional stress and/or administrative pressures to complete the evaluation in a timely manner. Many believed that they have been reduced to “gate-keepers” instead of critical analysts. When the investigator asked them to define what they meant by the term “gate-keeper” almost all noted their function is now one of determining eligibility for special education as opposed to being active problem-solvers. The majority of respondents (80%) also reported perceiving the quality of their evaluations being compromised which, in turn, has affected student services. Of the 10 psychologists interviewed a sample of their responses follow:

I experience a lot of pressure and stress from my administrators...they want me to be giving more screening tests such as the RIAS and KTEA brief but I won't budge on that. I can tell you that I'm not doing additional assessments such as processing tests. I do a full scale IQ and achievement-that's all. For gifted, I do abbreviated batteries. I also find that there are those pressures of having people tell me how to do my job. It seems like it has gone full cycle and is about regulation compliance. We're supposed to be professionals not technicians, and administrators from every level dictating to us how to do our job compounds the frustration.

I feel that the change has compromised the quality of my evaluations in the sense that it has created a reduction in testing. It used to be that it was welcomed, that we took our time and carefully evaluated the child to better understand the nature of the problem which was spelled out comprehensively in our recommendations. Now we are gate-keepers and not critical problem-solvers. I didn't go to any meetings that weren't pertinent. Psychologically, it made me a nervous wreck. I became pretty oppositional. I stayed with one case until I was done and remained focused. We have gone back to being gate-keepers, we don't do analysis (i.e. CTOPP) and find out where the problem is.

There were times this year that it just changed my response and happiness. I mean how much time could you spend behind a computer writing reports? It has affected my ability to follow-up on interventions to make sure that they were being done with integrity. I questioned this a number of times and it has really bothered me. It changed my ability to be a comprehensive problem-solver-you just can't operate in any other facet of your job because of the need for time. Another big area affected has been in professional development. Professional development opportunities are missed because you don't want to be out of your building. We had a two day conference on response to intervention. There were people who would go one day and that was it.

Interview Question 2:

What factors facilitated and/or impeded compliance with the mandated change?

Half of the psychologists interviewed reported that administrative priority or the support that they receive serve as factors that facilitate compliance with the evaluation timeframe. Several other respondents noted that hiring or contracting for more psychological services has enabled them to address their evaluative duties in a more reasonable manner.

The psychologists were more proficient in elaborating on those factors which they perceive as impeding compliance with the timeframe change. Nearly all of the respondents (80%) noted that the timeframe itself has served to impede the process, particularly when factoring in the holiday schedule which is time that counts toward the 60 calendar day limit, but for which the psychologists may not have access to the students. Other impeding factors reported by 70% of respondents included the evaluation report format and volume of information required as well as difficulty receiving paperwork back in a timely manner from other team members to include teachers and parents. To a lesser degree, 40% of the respondents noted that behavioral or risk assessments impeded compliance with the timeframe while several noted that the summer backlog of referrals held over from the summer serve as impediments with compliance.

It's an administrative priority. Also psychological services have been added one day by our LEA. As for those things that impede, holidays count! That's a real big problem--the lack of accessibility (time) really hurt us. I thought about calling a student in on Christmas day to evaluate just to make a point--I guess that's the oppositional part coming out. It's so unreasonable. Also the paperwork was very slow at the special education office. They hold cases over from last summer and that hurt me.

Scheduling problems with the LEA. Sometimes I would have to get the evaluations out to a parent by the 35th day to accommodate the LEA's ability to meet. Seeking and waiting for information from teachers and parents shuts the system down. There is also a gazillion functional behavioral assessments that slows down the process for compliance. Principals are not allowed to be LEA, only the special ed director.. Just the administrative attitude of complying with the regulation versus quality of evaluation and data gathering. What also hurt me was there were 40 referrals waiting for me in the fall. I've also had to retest some kids because the psychological reports were so poor. I've had a lot of stress and pressure because of my disastrous spring. If we keep doing the number of referrals schools won't hire more psychologists.

Threat assessments and crisis really interfere with my work. With a district of our size we had two major crises. They take up a lot of time and are not predictable. Due process legal challenges have also taken time away from my testing. As I said before the nature of the evaluation report has hindered compliance--it is much more confusing.

Interview Question 3:

To what extent has the change in evaluation time contributed to additional work beyond the contractual school day?

All of the psychologists interviewed responded that the change in evaluative timeframes has contributed to additional time beyond their normal contractual school hours. Most of the respondents indicate that the additional work performed involves either evaluation report writing or devoting time toward other critical functions, such as

behavioral programming, since they do not perceive themselves as having the time to do that duty during regular school hours. The following represent some of the typical samples taken from the interviews:

I am putting in additional time. I'm bringing a lot of work home. On average at least 90 minutes each night. I should also tell you that my lunches are out as well. I'm burned out working on multiple reports every night.

Yes, I was doing two-three hrs a week plus lunch. I've had to put in a couple of weekends. If not, they would have been late on everything in fall unless I worked in the evenings There used to be a psychologist that had a mindset that in education you always take things home.

Three nights 30 min-1 hour. For me it's a lot! It's just impossible for me to meet timelines--it's unattainable . . . it's impossible to do so . . . it's really a mess. Right now I'm running about 15-30 days past timeframe. I cringe because I do much more than testing/writing. At home a lot of time on phone with colleagues consulting more versus doing it on the job.

Interview Question: 4

Reflecting on the changes in response to Chapter 14 revisions, what concerns do you currently have regarding the amount of time required for student evaluations?

Expressed concerns regarding the time required for student evaluations were highly individualistic and appeared largely determined by the existing work context of each psychologist. In all, six concerns were reported by the respondents. Of these, two consistent concerns were reported. Specifically, 70% of the psychologists reported

experiencing administrative pressure to complete the evaluations on time. They further responded that such pressure created a situation whereby they were predominantly used as a tester at the exclusion of other critical competencies. A second consistent concern expressed by 60% of psychologists involved their perception of compromising the thoroughness of their evaluation by providing a basic report. Other reported concerns included difficulty getting the evaluation completed on time, difficulty knowing what to do with data after gathering it to program effectively for students, heightened stress due to the reduction in time, and a perception that psychologists are the sole compilers of the evaluation reports. A sample of the two consistent concerns follows:

The emphasis of a top-down direction about how a student's needs will be met. Administrators telling professional practitioners what to do out of resource constraints. It should be how can we accommodate child versus how can a child accommodate us. I'm concerned about the misconception about the least restrictive environment that meets a child's needs. We've gone backwards in so many ways. There is pressure to reduce the time, pressure to do the quickest, minimal evaluation possible to meet paperwork accountability and regulation compliance.

My main concern this year is that we're playing a time game . . . I'm giving up a lot of thoroughness and quality. Reports are so focused on the response to intervention bit--this approach takes time to assess the effectiveness and I don't believe we are giving that time in the manner intended, especially if it is a parent request. I was also concerned that I would not be as involved in the planning/intervention process.

The stress level impacts your ability to attend and focus and your ability to communicate with other teachers and parents. There is so much pressure to get work done to meet compliance. My initial interest was that it would force school districts to hire more psychologists. The pressure is extrinsic not intrinsic

Interview Question 5:

Have your perceptions changed during the course of the school year relative to the amount of time required for evaluations and, if so, how?

Most of the psychologists responded that their perceptions about the reduced time for student evaluations remained relatively stable throughout the school year. They continued to report on the consistent concerns referenced above about having experienced a less diversified role as well as a pressure to perform to a high degree of proficiency despite the loss of available time. Two psychologists reported that their experience has been somewhat better than expected as the year progressed and indicated that this was due to the fact that they were so stressed out at the beginning of the year and learned to let go of some of the stress. The following illustrates several of the sample responses:

My fears have come true. Everything that I worried about has happened. The quality of evaluations has suffered. There were things that I would like to have done but couldn't due to the time issue. I haven't been as involved in IST meetings. There is a perception that has developed that I'm not as accessible to IST team meetings. Not as many classroom observations are done on my part for testing. We used to do crisis response team meetings in the district--we didn't do them this year.

No, my perceptions didn't change. We analyze the spec ed referral rate. In spring we have a huge number of referrals--on top of that the district decides to do reevaluations and IEP's. The spec ed director demands she's there for all of the meetings. It gets to the point that this is ridiculous. I can't do this anymore. There just isn't enough time to do it all in a way that does justice to the kids. Everyone feels the same way, teachers, speech, IST. They're all under pressure because they're all due at the same time.

If less time it will be crippling. I worry we won't be able to keep up. Student services will be detrimental. There's a huge need for mental health services and counseling and we're not doing it. I worry that we are heading toward all testing and don't have time to do other roles.

Interview Question 6:

To what extent has the evaluative process been strengthened or weakened by the revised time mandate?

Of the 10 psychologists interviewed, 70% reported that they did not believe that the evaluative process has been strengthened at all in response to the timeframe change. Three psychologists provided individualistic responses of how they perceive the process being strengthened. These include: the parents receiving the evaluation reports sooner, more critical selection of tests that are of absolute necessity, and the advantage of a team approach toward the evaluative process. Eight out of 10 psychologists noted that the evaluative process has been weakened with the timeframe change. Among the weaknesses mentioned, seven of the eight respondents perceive the quality of the evaluation and/or report as being adversely affected. Other weaknesses noted included a

sense of “burn-out” from the time constraint, perception that the psychologist has been transformed from an analyst to a compiler of information, and over-reliance on forms/rating scales instead of direct communications with parents. The following is a sample of psychologists’ responses:

The shortened timeline helps us to stop and think is this necessary? What assessment method would be most efficient and powerful like a managed health care system. What has weakened the process is that kids get re-referred over and over because they’re being missed the first time. If we do sketchy assessments to meet timelines and paperwork we miss services for children. We then miss the spirit of special education due to the need to push and push-we miss the fidelity of interventions. We seem to be back to paperwork accountability and regulation compliance. Above all, we need to be careful about over-regulation and allow for individual judgment of the practitioner.

I believe that it’s been weakened. If you want to meet timelines, I don’t believe that the reports are as thorough. If I start testing and see ADHD or executive function problems in the past I would go back and explore it to try to better understand and report on how to help the student. Now, I place any processing tests as recommendations to do in the future as opposed to having done it and included it in the evaluation report. We’re back to being gatekeepers. Yes they qualify or no they don’t. In general that’s the trend. I’m cutting back on tests, not analyzing data as much, and not giving more information. The evaluation report form has hindered the process. It is repetitive and has made it much harder.

Interview Question 7:

What are your perceptions regarding the quality of the evaluation report in response to the change in comparison to previous school years?

Of the 10 psychologists interviewed, 60% responded that they believe that they have compromised the quality of the evaluation reports on a consistent basis during the 2008/09 school year. When asked how their reports are less qualitative, most indicated that they were not as detailed in depth, breadth, or both. Some respondents further noted that they do not provide the level of analysis or recommendations as they have in past years. The remaining 40% of psychologists reported that they have taken a stand not to jeopardize their evaluations and/or reports, but three of the four indicated that they work additional hours after school to accomplish this goal. The following responses illustrate these findings:

I believe that the quality of my reports is lagging both in depth and in breadth.

My reports are just not being done to quality standards. It really bothers me to cut back on the quality of the child. I've not met any of my timelines.

My reports are not as good as they could be. There has been no increase in psychological support--nothing's changed. We are faced with the same number of students with less time to do it. The timing has hurt as well. There might be a month with nothing and then I get a slew of these when a number may be due.

From April through May 1st, 15 were due in a 6-8 week period. We did do Saturday testing, I believe two Saturdays. The reports are simply not as thorough or complete. I've become more regimental with testing and have every minute planned out of my day. I feel very constrained in trying to maintain flexibility

with teachers' and kids' schedules and in trying to maintain a good working relationship.

I think I have done a quality evaluation. I'm not going to stop or compromise with a kid. I haven't compromised with testing. I tend to over-evaluate but work extra at night keeping pace and at the cost of other critical functions.

Interview Question 8:

What formal or informal policies or procedures have been instituted since July, 2008 to assist a smooth adjustment resulting from the timeframe change?

Responses to this question were quite varied and individualistic to the specific work context the psychologist experienced. Although no consistent pattern of policy development was noted, several psychologists reported their referrals have become more centralized at the special education office in an effort to better manage timeframes. In addition, several other psychologists noted that the referrals have been staggered more around the holiday times to curtail the tendency for a backlog of cases that would all be due within similar timeframes. When the discussion focused on specific procedures, 60% of the psychologists reported the use of some type of a template to help them organize their thinking and offset additional time for each case when much of the information inherent in the instruments or data reporting remains constant. Another 60% of the respondents noted that they have tried to streamline their testing with the reason for referral as a time management strategy. Half of the psychologists interviewed indicated that they rely more on technology such as the districts' performance tracker or MMS system to access information more readily. Other reported procedures included more

frequent use of emails, cutting and pasting information, aligning pre-referral questions with the evaluation report, rejecting parent requests for an evaluation if, after a records review, it was not deemed appropriate, preparing tests/protocols ahead of time, and trying to improve the gifted screening process to reduce the volume of referrals. The following sample responses represent these findings:

I've developed templates for different tests to save time. They are "skeletal" types and I fill them in with specific data later. I have also started focusing on the reason for referral more diligently trying to look more carefully at what we are trying to assess. I have used our performance tracker as a technology tool and have used district resources such as the IST teacher who collects all info in a folder. I have also consulted more with colleagues. I regret that we're the compilers . . . now I'm the compiler at the secondary level and have to chase the nurse, speech, O.T. etc. We need to do more training on how to use the forms properly. Right now we're using the forms inappropriately to control the 60 day process

Emails have significantly helped. We have also used a "back-pack" secretary where things are more centralized which has helped a lot. At the elementary level we put a lot on IST to gather information and classroom observations. I still use modified "cut and paste" for my evaluation template but then individualize it with specific results. We also have a report card data base that is mailed by the building secretary.

We now do a pre-referral packet and have an IST/psychologist meeting once a month with the special education director. This year we really "tweaked"

the IST questions for teachers and parents to align with the ER report. We made the terminology more user friendly so that it would line up with the ER report better. We now ask about a student's performance relative to grade level--it's a lot of information but easy to fill out. Email has been a source of technology that has helped a lot this year. It has helped me cut and paste CBA, summaries and observations in their respective place. I feel like I'm a compiler of information. I've also used cut and paste in completing multiple kids ER reports.

Interview Question 9:

What do you believe would represent an unreasonable timeframe imposed by state or federal authorities for the completion of student evaluations?

Eight out of 10 school psychologists responded that the existing mandate represents an unreasonable allocation of time for the completion of student evaluations. One psychologist reported that imposing a 45 day limit would be problematic and that he was used to having to be accountable for many additional functions, other than testing, in previous school assignments. The other psychologist noted that the additional psychologist hired for the 2008/2009 school year by her district made a huge impact in her ability to get her evaluations conducted in a manageable manner.

I feel this is unreasonable now. What would be great if we had lower numbers--get testing done placed and help the student. This is difficult now with the number of referrals we have. I have done less communicating with staff due to time. It is very frustrating that this is such a poor reflection on me instead of a poor reflection on the system. It's us that do it all . . . collecting all of the

information . . .this whole LD component with all of the additional questions to address. It is taking such an inordinate amount of time.

Sixty days now is a problem and unreasonable. It's unreasonable especially with the additional requirement of new paperwork. It just seems like they want us to do more work with less time-very unrealistic! With calendar days you assume that you have all of these days to complete the evaluation and you obviously don't.

Other than where we're at right now? . . . I think we're at that point Any less then I can't imagine what our evaluations and services to kids would be like.

Interview Question 10:

Explain the role you serve as part of the evaluative process, and what percentage of time this requires relative to your overall professional duties.

Eight out of 10 psychologists reported devoting 75%-80% of their time in a testing capacity with half of the respondents indicating that their time is exclusively allocated to evaluating students and approximates 90% of their overall duties. All of the respondents noted that they serve as the chief compiler of data for the evaluation reports and perform all of the standardized testing, particularly at the secondary level. Three elementary building psychologists noted that their pre-referral teams are good about gathering progress monitoring data and forwarding the materials to them for inclusion into the final evaluation reports. Most of the respondents (80%) further noted that other critical functions such as the development of mental health interventions, counseling, and

consultation are lacking in response to the amount of time allocated to their evaluation role. The following samples serve to underscore these observations:

I review the records and interview students and do all the testing and writing of the ER. The role is more testing. They just want me to get evaluations done. I've been largely taken out of a consultative role on a consistent basis. I still do priority functional behavior assessments on an emergency basis but the level of consultation for the behavior assessment and positive behavior support plan has dropped. My range of services has become more constricted. Now I worry that I am a psychometrician. The role is more testing in less time.

I was told that it was unacceptable to be late for an evaluation. We didn't have one meeting about the reevaluation process, about what goes where. I write and compile the report. At the elementary level they're good at getting CBA data but not looking at data--not all data is good data. The parent referrals . . . well . . . I'm on my own. I do all the testing and do not go to meetings. I was told to use my time to test. I didn't go to RTI meetings, they saw me as a tester. I offered to do functional behavior assessments but the supervisor would write to the person and say no, it doesn't need to be done. I do no consulting or counseling. The RTI leader is a strong person. It was difficult to get the team to modify what needed to be done. At the seventh and eighth grade building level they are doing nothing for the evaluation--they were looking at some things. The percentage of my time testing is about 90% and I still need to work several nights.

The following section provides further preliminary analyses and sample responses derived from three focus group interviews conducted. For each question, patterns and/or

themes will be presented and are based on the consistency of responses across all three groups. The focus group interview questions remained constant with the individual interview questions for comparative purposes, and to further strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Focus Group Responses to Interview

Interview Question 1:

How has the timeframe change governing student evaluations affected your practice?

All three focus groups responded that they have experienced additional pressure to keep up with the compliance requirement in response to the timeframe change. Most of the psychologists across the groups noted that critical functions such as consulting and counseling have been compromised and have become more dependent on receiving progress monitoring data from pre-referral teams at the elementary level. Two of the three focus groups additionally noted that they struggle with the evaluation report being forwarded to the parents without appropriate communication regarding the sensitivity of the report's contents. The following sample response provides an illustration of the above:

So much is dependent on parent and teacher responses and referrals. There's no time to do follow-up questions . . . so much time collecting data . . . pressures to get done. I want to meet with parents, talk with parents. The committee is not doing this. It goes against what's in the best interest of the students. I'm very worried about just sending a report home, especially on a sensitive case such as mental retardation. We're not always able to obtain parent input and responses.

OT and speech therapy evaluations don't arrive in a timely manner to integrate and question regarding the whole picture. We discussed the concerns with completing the evaluations and then having to re-open and look again at additional issues that may have surfaced during the initial 60 calendar day time period. All are feeling pressure to complete within the timelines. We also discussed the concern regarding sending home reports by the 60 day timeline as a frustration and problematic when we are not able to meet with parents prior to them receiving the ER report. Some identifications, such as MR, may be difficult for a parent to read in print.

Interview Question 2:

What factors facilitated and/or impeded compliance with the mandated change?

Two of the three focus groups reported that administrative priority to complete evaluations within the 60 calendar day limit serves as an important factor that facilitates compliance. Other facilitating factors reported by individual groups included increased teacher knowledge of the evaluative process and data collection, the RTI team model at the elementary level, and streamlining the reason for referral and battery of tests to keep it more focused. The focus groups devoted most of their time elaborating on impeding factors that inhibited compliance with the timeframe change. All groups reported that the holidays and weekends serve to impede compliance with the timely completion of the evaluation. All three groups also noted that the sheer volume of information required in the evaluation report has created a hardship relative to the timely completion of the evaluation. Other impeding factors reported individually by the groups included the political climate which was defined as the parents determining testing in an affluent

district, an increase of ESL referrals when it is more of a language/cultural issue, uncontrollable factors such as snow days, student absences and high priority critical cases such as manifestation determination meetings on special needs students or behavioral assessment meetings. The following is a sample of the focus group responses:

Attendance has affected compliance rate. Snow days have had an affect. Other miscellaneous activities such as competing with guest speakers, field days, assemblies and taking tests have all had some effect on getting students tested. The most notable factor that has hurt has been the holidays--that has really hurt us. Space is a big factor--sometimes space is a real impeding problem. FBAs, manifestations and tons of meetings have impeded us. Student centered meetings have interfered with the compliance process. Six days each year to talk about student issues, that's a lot for me. Factors helping: it's more of a priority from the top. We have also streamlined the reason for referral and battery of tests- they're more focused and this helps us to work smarter. I'll call to see if student is in assembly. I'll call to see if space is available.

I believe this whole process sets itself up more for legal challenges and due process . . . absenteeism has been a problem on occasion. Schedules of not being at assignment consistently--I have to fill in for Jesse who is on maternity leave. I found out five days before she left . . . now my regular schedule suffers. The workload itself serves as an impediment. I have to bring kids in sometimes from three-five o'clock to get them tested. We all want our district to succeed but at what cost? We're not happy and the workload has created a burden that makes it stressful on us. The holidays and weekends counting just isn't fair--I'm very

“peeved” about that. The sheer amount of paperwork and confusion about what really needs to be done and in the report sets us up more for legal challenges. We need more psychologists to support quality of services to districts and to the students. Also poor in-servicing has hurt us. Our in-service has been terribly lacking . . . we’re getting nothing and what we do get is very confusing. If I hadn’t gone to LEA training, I would be completely in the dark. I’m angry with the state association (ASP.) They should have been parked out there when all of these changes were going on in Harrisburg.

Interview Question 3:

To what extent has the change in evaluation time contributed to additional work beyond the contractual school day?

All three focus groups reported that the reduced timeframe for evaluations has contributed to additional time beyond their normal school hours. One group functioning in a large metropolitan area reported that administration has hired an additional school psychologist who had been interning the previous school year. This group, on average, further reported working an extra three hours per day to keep up with work expectations. Most respondents from the other two groups reported working two additional hours per day to comply with job requirements. One psychologist was quick to note that she was hired from part-time to full-time status. The following sample illustrates these findings:

I’m working every night. If I were to estimate, I’d say about eight hours a week extra . . . I’m also testing kids from three-five if I have to for compliance. I’m working through lunch everyday plus an average of an extra hour a day. I’m also stealing time from my program classes to give to the district to support their

evaluation needs. I've been out of compliance on a number of evaluations. I don't know the exact number but it's just ridiculous trying to keep up with all that we're supposed to be doing let alone balancing our other areas of expertise. I'm busting my a--every day. That's why I do all of my work at home--I just completed my 100th referral. Mike: I do very little work at home, maybe 1-2 hrs a week . . . I won't do that with my family.

Interview Question 4:

Reflecting on the changes in response to Chapter 14 revisions, what concerns do you currently have regarding the amount of time required for student evaluations?

Of the three groups interviewed one consistent concern was expressed and discussed at length. This involved the perception that the truncated timeframe has narrowed the psychologist's role in fulfilling other critical job-related competencies. The large metropolitan focus group was more split on this issue and this seemed to be more of a function of individual building assignments. Nonetheless, all agreed that it is a struggle attempting to balance the evaluative role with other responsibilities. Others expressed concerns included the frustration of being accountable for holidays and weekends, added stress/pressure in meeting district expectations, difficulty with time management, and concern about the volume of data required for the report. The sample responses below provide an excerpt of these observations:

The amount of information that we need to gather to complete the ER is unreal. I believe the evaluation process is pushing us into RTI and is designed to get us deeper into the RTI mode. I have to do everything. I'm a secretary, I have to get

all of the medical information, and I have to coordinate with all of the other staff involved in this case. Again the timeframe issue isn't a psychologist problem, it's a district problem. We should give our piece and move on to something else . . . but no one else wants to be responsible for the evaluations. I'm glad to do it because at least I have a job. All of the interventions that we're doing seem to be keeping a struggling student out of spec education when in fact they need the services. When a student is kept in regular education classes that kid is going to suffer and every kid in the class is going to suffer . . . I'm concerned about teachers who don't know s---lousy teachers trying to give information. What has happened to looking at a child's rate of learning . . . going to teachers and explaining learning style, motivation, instructional approaches . . . basically the state has said every kid could do it and that's a freakin impossibility. We expect every teacher to maintain a specific skill set . . . the 60 days has collapsed our role and has forced us back into the test kit.

Interview Question 5:

Have your perceptions changed during the course of the school year relative to the amount of time required for evaluations and, if so, how?

All three groups reported that the concerns they expressed in question four have remained fairly consistent throughout the school year. They expressed the pressure experienced in trying to reconcile their need to help the student with the reality of having less time to devote to the process. One of the focus groups reported that their anxieties in some respects subsided as the year progressed which they attributed to additional

trainings on the Chapter 14 changes. The following provides some sample responses to this item:

It hasn't been as bad as I thought that it might but that is due to the changes and trainings we've done. We're still concerned about reevaluations at the High school level. I believe that teachers are not doing their part. I've done everything regarding reevaluations and that shouldn't be the case. It makes it much more difficult on everyone to ensure that they get all that is needed for that case.

Not really. I'm still running around having to get more information than ever before. I'm in a small district. Of course it may be different for Tim. The paperwork is awful and very confusing. A lot of time seems to be spent just trying to figure out what goes where. I'm getting better at it though. I'm concerned that we're going to be relegated to some other role. They may want someone other than the psychologist to do this then they don't need a psychologist. Like I said I'm concerned about more legal challenges. We're not going to get it right if you're moving too fast and are not as complete or thorough. I'm also concerned about people making decisions who don't have the background to make the decisions such as parents giving most of the information and the administration at Harrisburg.

Interview Question 6:

To what extent has the evaluative process been strengthened or weakened by the revised time mandate?

All three groups reported that they do not believe that the evaluative process overall has been strengthened. One group who has some control on the formal referral

process noted that the reduced timeframe has forced them to review files more carefully and make time to communicate with teachers in an effort to determine which students should be formally evaluated. This same group also noted that they believe that the process benefits parents more by providing them a report faster and having non-complicated cases receiving services in a timelier manner. As for weaknesses noted, two of the three groups indicated that the reduced timeframe has interfered with other job-related functions deemed essential to professional practice as well as contributing to ineffective time management. Two groups also noted that they believe that the RTI model has contributed to lengthier timeframes if program fidelity is to be maintained. The following sample responses illustrate this observation:

It hasn't strengthened it at all. I do the whole teacher fidelity bull----! I cut and paste the three no questions. I ask teachers for copies of their act 48 and ask them to sign a sheet attesting to it. The evaluation has been weakened by having to spend more time tracking and gathering evidence of people's credentials and interventions fidelity rather than on spending time with the student. I've had to take my time from program classes to give to the district's needs. I've also had to give up other critical functions to meet testing demands. Half of my assignment is for mental health services. I've developed a shortened form to shorten testing time in an effort to meet the mental health agency's demands for merely an IQ and adaptive score versus a whole report.

Can't imagine it's been strengthened at all. Weakness: not having enough time to do all the things we are trained to do plus it has affected my family time. Concerned about being pulled in all directions and being stressed out as much.

Benefit: 60 school days can seem really long from a parent's perspective..can get services faster than before. Also has allowed me to do a lot more file reviews and contacts with teachers before making a formal referral.

Interview Question 7:

What are your perceptions regarding the quality of the evaluation report in response to the change in comparison to previous school years?

All three focus groups had concerns about the quality of their evaluations. Two of the three groups noted a general level of dissatisfaction in the manner that the reduced timeframe has affected the evaluations within their district. These groups indicated a belief that they are not looking as thoroughly as they should be in formulating placement decisions which seemed to disturb them immensely. The third group indicated that they chose not to compromise on evaluation quality but did report having to devote a greater level of their own time to maintain this standard. The following sample responses shed additional insight on these findings:

I do the very basic evaluation. The quality has suffered and that really bothers me. Same thing--it's very basic . . . all of the running around and getting information has not allowed us to spend quality time with the students . . . I believe that the quality of reports are hurt . . . and the student suffers due to not getting the services he should get. I don't think that was the intent of the change and is showing it to have the reverse effect.

We are not as happy . . . I'd like to be more concise . . . 60 days seems to be the same quality but we will close out and begin the process anew In some schools, I don't have as much data to make decisions so it is a conjecture

. . . not looking as closely as I should be makes it very difficult. We may not have all the data that we need to make decisions, so we are forced to keep going with a new evaluation because we can't obtain all of the information that we need to in the initial 60 day process--that's troublesome.

Interview Question 8:

What formal or informal policies and procedures have been instituted since July, 2008 to assist a smooth adjustment resulting from the timeframe change?

Two of the three groups noted that they rely heavily on pre-referral teams such as instructional support to consolidate some of the data required for the evaluation report. This utilization of resource sharing was noted as a great source of assistance in the management of available time. Two groups also noted the hiring of additional school psychological service time to augment the ability to meet compliance standards. No other consistent policies were expressed among the groups. When discussing specific procedures employed in the execution of their practice, two of the groups noted that they have streamlined their testing based on looking carefully at what needs to be educationally addressed in each case. Two groups also reported a heavy reliance on screening forms as a data gathering tool in lieu of direct consultation. Other individually reported procedures included the development of a screening policy for re-evaluations, increased parent meetings on cases deemed to be inappropriate for full evaluation, referral staggering, use of technology as a time management tool and additional training of support staff on the evaluative process.

In one school our special education teachers are responsible for section #1 of ER . . . my role is observation. We piece meal out for Reevaluations. For initial evaluations, I still do instructional support teaming (IST.) IST will often get much evaluation report data. There has also been a huge reliance on evaluation forms to get data (i.e. attendance, disciplinary, medical etc.). Training of case-managers on new forms and how to best gather it . . . Hopefully, their training will ease pressures off psychologists. We've also hired an extra psychologist.

In my building there was a change that the case-managers are asked to add components. This is more for reevaluation reports. In the elementary, the ISTs do a lot of the background information on the initial evaluations. Training was provided to case-managers to help them understand how to complete sections of the reevaluation reports. We do try to use technology to help with the process as much as possible.

Screening policy for re-evaluations. Right now the "data only" re-evals take a great deal of time to review. Streamlining testing based on referral questions . . . Not working from "Thought to be exceptional" anymore. One thing that cut down on referrals at HS and elementary is psychological consults. These are shortened versions of the full evaluation report but focus on specific activities such as behavior, attention etc. We'll do some testing and send out to parents. We do get parent permission to do these. It's very involved with RTI and response to intervention. With consults time doesn't start. I'm doing consults as well. Also creation of a screening form. This is a sheet to determine who would benefit from a full re-evaluation given their situation and future plans.

Also, getting back with parents on legitimate cases versus the whole pool and doing all of them.

Interview Question 9:

What do you believe would represent an unreasonable timeframe imposed by state or federal authorities for the completion of student evaluations?

All three focus groups indicated that the current 60 calendar day mandate represents an unreasonable timeframe for the completion of student evaluations. Most of the respondents reported a concern that decision makers have shifted their emphasis from a student-centered approach, predicated on devoting the initial time required to fully understand the child, to an emphasis that is time centered. This can be seen in the following sample responses:

We're here now! It's the timeline coupled with extra responsibilities that makes it unreasonable. If we're going to keep timelines then we have to restructure the ER/RR--by shortening the timeframe they've set themselves up for more lawsuits across the state. Most psychologists are diligent , hard working--it's not our issue, it's a district issue. As long as we keep doing the work nothing is going to change. The problem is how do we not keep doing it? Either a crappy report is going out making us more vulnerable legally or the kid suffers--neither is acceptable. I'm concerned about the profession--one camp wants us to be educators adhering to timelines, while another camp wants us to be psychologists. There has got to be a way to weed out inappropriate referrals.

This is it-60 days! Placing any timelines is going to interfere with our report. Shortened timelines makes it more difficult. We need to be child centered

not timeline centered. The interventions are key--if you do not have interventions in place; there is no easy way to complete the evaluation--you need to take time to evaluate the program fidelity and review the data.

Interview Question 10:

Explain the role you serve as part of the evaluative process and what percentage of time this requires relative to your overall professional duties.

Although there was some individual variability observed in several psychologists roles, the majority of respondents across all three of the focus groups reported that their role is characterized by a great deal of data gathering and compilation in the preparation of the evaluation report. All three groups further noted that they conduct most of the standardized testing, particularly at the secondary level and develop the evaluation report which was noted as a time consuming effort that has become more complicated since the July, 2008 Chapter 14 changes. The majority of respondents noted devoting in excess of 80% of their time for the conduct of student evaluations. One group noted that they experience a more diversified role which is largely due to their ability to be part of the screening process whereby many of the student problems are addressed through “psychological consults.” Nonetheless, the respondents of this group reported that when they do have a full evaluation they spend anywhere from 12-20 hours on the evaluation and completion of the subsequent report. The following sample responses provide added insight into this question:

The evaluation role varies somewhat. Some of us are at the front end of team planning and consultation role and we don't do a full battery. In the past, all I did was test . . . we were evolving from refer, test, place to understanding what the

child struggles in and how we could help in the classroom and in instruction. I feel like we're going back in time to say test and get them out of here. We are involved in team meetings and testing all the time. We also have high tax payers--parents are very affluent and opinionated. Often, the parent requests come through teachers to circumvent the process. We're evaluating all the time--it becomes very cookie cutter. All agree that it is about 90% of our time. The impact of even the college evaluations can be overwhelming--parents make requests for evaluations of students who are not even considering going to college. We don't have the time to do the consultative role any longer. The parent requests are coming from the teacher recommendations to the parent. As ESL coordinator, the ESL students are often referred for testing. Many teachers do not want to acknowledge that it takes seven years to acquire a language. There has been an increase in the referrals and it is very concerning. All acknowledged the difficulties. There has been an impact on time spent to complete the evaluations. This school year we have added a new psychologist based on the overtime demonstrated by the other psychologists the previous school year.

Ninety-five—ninety-nine percent of my time goes for testing and evaluation. More paperwork that I'm doing this school year. A lot of running around and getting information from people--it's very time consuming trying to get all the information and then to piece it together adds to the frustration. I've carved out a role for myself in past years for core competencies, but that has had to take a back seat due to data collection and information gathering.

The final section provides a brief analyses and sampling of interview responses from seven supervisors of special education. Their selection was based on their years of experience which is believed to contribute toward a deep perspective in corroborating other data collected from the psychologists. The interview responses and excerpts were chosen for the common elements they share among the supervisors. As such, they are intended to identify patterns which serve to provide additional credibility to the overall study.

Special Education Supervisors' Responses to Interview

Interview Question 1:

How has the timeframe change governing student evaluations affected your practice?

The majority of respondents (71%) noted that the reduced timeframe for student evaluations has added increased pressure to either their role or toward the completion of the evaluation process. Most of the respondents reported having to devote additional time training other staff members on Chapter 14 and newly revised time mandates, revamping pre-referral screening materials and/or conducting more meetings with parents and teachers as a result of the change. To a lesser degree, supervisors noted experiencing a greater sense of urgency by the state or their supervisor, more difficulty evaluating interventions appropriately within timeframe constraints, and having to be more innovative with procedures in order to avoid a non-compliant situation. The following samples underscore these findings:

Absolutely it's affected my work. I'm being pushed from the state as well as from parents and administrators--it's really pushed me hard and has created a

great deal of stress. It's also affected time with my psychologist-she needs more time being reassured and feeling that's it's ok to feel pressure. It's affected more time with teachers and principals and IST--my helping them craft the pre-referral matrix. There's more time refining screening material. There's a priority to do a better job in quality with less time and that's hard--it just doesn't make sense to me. It's changed participation with parents. It's changed who is involved and what they're doing which all translate into more time.

The biggest most wonderful thing is what has been done before the evaluation. The timeframe change forced us to fine tune what we were already doing from a pre-referral standpoint. The timeframe has affected my role by placing a great deal of emphasis on teamwork, collaboration and ownership for each respective piece of the evaluation . . . no one person could conceivably do a good job alone--it has speeded up the sense of urgency since we have to get the reports to the parents by the 50th day. The ownership of responsibilities has created a paradigm shift--everyone does their job which has worked well so far with our people.

Interview Question 2:

What factors facilitated and/or impeded compliance with the mandated change?

Four of the seven respondents noted proactive measures such as the development of an improvement plan, a referral packet as part of pre-referral data, or alignment of documents as factors that have facilitated compliance with the regulatory change for their districts. Three of the respondents experienced difficulty commenting on any specific

facilitative measures involving compliance for their district, but recognized the sense of urgency that the law requires. When discussing those factors that impede compliance with the timeframe change, 57% of the respondents noted that the timeframes themselves had hindered the process by holding districts accountable for holidays and weekends. In addition, 43% of the respondents noted that more complex cases involving functional behavior assessments or manifestation determinations involve a great deal of available time, and serve as impediments to the evaluative process. Other individualistic impeding factors included a high volume of Hispanic students and ESL cases which compound sound evaluations given their complexity, regulations that are perceived as confusing and complicated to interpret, teachers usurping the referral system, and attendance issues.

The following responses serve to illustrate these observations:

Impeded: Functional behavior assessments (FBA's) have really taken a lot of time which does tend to get in the way of stringent timeframes. Also the NI and psychiatric schedule for evaluations makes it difficult at times for us to be in compliance--that can be a challenge since there's such a wait time. Christmas break was very difficult and hurt the process and we were getting behind. Being held accountable for holidays and weekends is difficult. Attendance issues were excessively problematic last year--it would have really hurt our timeframes this year if we had the same trend. Facilitated: There is a greater sense of urgency to get the evaluations done. It's now in the forefront with the Superintendents guidance as where before there was a tendency to put them off.

The timelines themselves have hurt because the parent referrals do not allow us to get as good of pre-referral information. The breaks and weekends

count now. Interpretation with the law has impeded the process. We have had some issues with interpreting the laws as to having the report in the parent's hand before the 60th day and or having the meeting within 60 school days. We have settled on having the report in the parents hand prior to the 60th day. Attendance has been an episodic problem for us. Our very high risk cases have affected the timeline--we contracted with the IU for two days of psychologist time for the Middle School. Also, teachers "egging" on parents for evaluations has hurt us--it expedites the process and information is not as good or interventions are not performed in the manner that they were intended.

Factors facilitating include developing the referral packet. Also, the fact that we have personnel assigned in specialty roles helps. For example if we have to do a Manifestation Determination it is assigned to a supervisor without bogging down the psychologists time. Factors impeding include the high volume of cases (202) of IEP move-ins--the paperwork to ensure that everything is legal is challenging. Also the whole spec ed versus ESL complexity is very sensitive for minority cases--many of them will go back to Mexico during the school year for three months or so and that really hurts compliance when doing our RR's. Attendance in some cases hurts us Our time is also consumed by the high percentage of foster students placed in our district, subsidized housing and minority cases.

Interview Question 3:

To what extent has the change in evaluation time contributed to additional work beyond the contractual school day?

Five of the seven special education directors (71%) reported that the change in the evaluation timeframes has created additional work for them during the context of their school day. Of these five respondents three reported working additional time beyond the school day to maintain acceptable standards in their overall job-related responsibilities. The additional work noted generally included preparing for staff trainings and parent consultations as well as taking time to ensure that teacher generated intervention data was appropriate. The following responses highlight this finding:

Yes, I have devoted much additional time due to the change. Please explain further: Well just orchestrating and coordinating with 69 teachers, supervisors and psychologists in making sure that the magnitude of information is being conveyed consistently. I can't really place a specific number of hours on it Just staying on top of everything, making sure that people are knowledgeable is a challenge to my time. I also know the psychologists are working in their evenings writing reports, their emails attest to that. I worry about my psychologists becoming test machines.

It has increased this year. I have had to work five 10 hour days. I have had to go to teachers and say to them you need to get intervention and back-up data in on a timely basis. It really does add a great deal of extra time. Twenty-five individualized education plans (IEPs) I had to do myself which takes longer with all of the new areas that need to be covered. From four-six p.m. is time doing paperwork here. Extra time spent if a child doesn't qualify for an IEP. We had one child who had characteristics of ADHD - now we have to do a 504 service plan attached checklist.

Interview Question 4:

Reflecting on the changes in response to Chapter 14 revisions, what concerns do you currently have regarding the amount of time required for student evaluations?

Four of the seven respondents (57%) indicated that their primary concern regarding the reduced evaluative timeframe involved the perception of their school psychologists having to reduce or eliminate other critically important job-related functions in their district. Three respondents (43%) additionally expressed a concern regarding the quality of the evaluations being compromised in response to parent referrals. Other concerns were more individualistic in nature and included difficulty managing all components of the evaluation report, confusion stemming from paperwork redundancy, psychologist welfare as they seek to adjust to current timeline conditions, and concern that the process will become even more restricted should the state perceive districts succeeding. The following sample responses substantiate these findings:

I empathize for our psychologists. I worry that testing will take too much of their time and that they will not be able to attend to some other critical functions, or will become stressed out. I am respectfully concerned about the manageability of the evaluation, particularly when secondary information to complete an evaluation appropriately is more difficult to get and they have to get it to the parent in 50 days--that's a lot to accomplish!

The ability of the psychologist role in doing many other district functions this year. I was concerned that changes would stress out my psychologists. I was vehemently against the change. I called the state board of education president to

say don't make this change it will make life more difficult. As a special education supervisor, I asked the state board of education president why Pa went for this and was told that parent groups wanted this.

Interview Question 5:

Have your perceptions changed during the course of the school year relative to the amount of time required for evaluations and, if so, how?

Most of the respondents noted that their perceptions, relative to the amount of time required for student evaluations, have remained consistent throughout the 2008/09 school year. Five of the respondents continued to express either concerns about the change in their psychologist's role or compromised quality of the evaluation. Two respondents noted that their perceptions have changed with one respondent believing that the process is more difficult now than at the beginning of the year while another respondent reported that the change has improved team collaboration. The following sample responses provide further insight into these findings:

My concerns have continued to focus on how we are supposed to do a more comprehensive job in our testing and evaluations with fewer resources? I am concerned that things, including the time we have will get worse. I am also concerned about the evaluation report form because the report has so many components it's tied our hands. We are required to provide more quality with less time.

No. I'm still very concerned that my psychologists are stressed out. Their affect has changed. They don't seem as happy or willing to volunteer for the things they normally would have. They need to be able to perform all of their

responsibilities or else they'll become even more frustrated. I understand there's only so much time and it's not their fault.

Not really. I am still concerned about students not getting the proper services due to timeframes causing people to make uninformed decisions. I think the course of the school year has only been a reinforcement of not liking the new timeline. We utilize our school psychologist in ways other than "testing." I do not want to be viewed as the "gateway" to special education services.

Interview Question 6:

To what extent has the evaluative process been strengthened or weakened by the revised time mandate?

Of the seven respondents interviewed only one supervisor stated that she believed that the overall evaluative process has been strengthened in response to the timeframe change. This individual noted that it has facilitated an improved collaborative effort in the evaluative process. Another respondent noted that while she perceived communications improving out of a sense of urgency, the change has created a greater degree of stress for all involved in the process. The remaining five respondents noted that they believe the overall process has become weakened with the lack of thoroughness in evaluation and report quality as well as truncated periods of time for determining efficacy of interventions as main reasons stated. Additional reasons included increased stress and pressure placed on personnel, negative impact on evaluation practice, and increased fear of legal repercussions for non-compliance. The following sample responses provide added insight:

The evaluative process has been largely weakened by the revised time mandate. I feel that adhering to the timeline may compromise the value and quality of the evaluation reports. The team will not be able to fully investigate and gather appropriate information and intervention results on students. It will serve to weaken giving a complete picture of a child. It has also weakened appropriate intervention periods from being carried out as intended.

I don't think it was worth it. The process seems a lot more weakened. To do a more thorough, comprehensive service such as a full evaluation and include all of the details in the report form you need more time. I believe it has had more of a negative impact on the practice. It seems to have placed a lot of stress on our psychologists. If it has been strengthened at all then maybe for the parents to get eligibility for services--not a whole lot sooner though.

Interview Question 7:

What are your perceptions regarding the quality of the evaluation report in response to the change in comparison to previous school years?

Three special education supervisors noted that they believe that the quality of the evaluation reports has been adversely affected by a lack of data required for placement decisions or determining current educational needs. Three respondents noted that the evaluation report has not changed in quality, but two of these three respondents went on to indicate that the quality has been largely maintained by additional off duty time provided by the psychologist. One respondent noted that she believes the report quality has improved as a result of the team collaboration and data gathering effort. The following responses illustrate these findings:

The quality of reports is going to only be as strong as the information provided by the pre-referral screening process. If the pre-referral team does not have adequate time to gather information, we will not have a full picture of the student. I feel this is the case to a large extent. The evaluation is only as thorough as information given to the psychologist. It's only a snapshot in doing the evaluation. The other information will suffer and the report will suffer and the kid will suffer. The psychologist is only one part but not all of it. If no time for interventions, even if there is a discrepancy, there can be no services.

Testing and writing were always thorough and complete in the past. Thoroughness and time writing--these do impact quality Time is so much less it does impact us. You begin to look for things you could drop out. Quality is compromised--sometimes we need to go back and do extra testing but don't have time--completeness suffers. Transitions added in report format has really impacted our learning support teachers for transition data. It has increased their time making it more difficult.

The psychologists have shifted quality to their own off time at home. They put in a lot of their personal time. The affect of our psychologists is down--they don't see them as happy. After school parent trainings--they're not taking on anything else . . . consultation is down and they are report writing more and more.

Interview Question 8:

What formal or informal policies and procedures have been instituted since July, 2008 to assist a smooth adjustment resulting from the timeframe change?

Respondents shared a number of policies and procedures they have implemented to facilitate a smooth adjustment to the evaluative timeframe change. Two particular policies that were shared by a majority of supervisors (86%) included additional training of district staff on the revised evaluative timeframes and four of the seven respondents further noted that they have streamlined forms and tracking strategies by centralizing their procedures through the special education office which has improved manageability.

Other policies that were consistently shared by several respondents included staggering referrals in an effort to offset a backlog situation from occurring, developing improved screening procedures to discern legitimate from inappropriate referrals, and meeting more frequently with parents to review progress data which has resulted in occasionally denying parent requests for an evaluation if the data did not support conclusions. Other notable policies and procedures reported included contracting for more additional psychologist time, extending strategies to secondary levels, requiring interventions to be completed by regular education teachers prior to a formal referral, accepting outside psychiatric recommendations for high risk youth, using forms as a catalyst for team discussion, and utilizing special education resources for Tier 3 student referrals. The following response samples underscore these findings:

We have published articles in the district newsletter on response to intervention (RTI). We made provisions to extend our RTI model to the secondary level. Next year the middle school will be implementing RTI. We are providing more training to assist people to better understand the stakes involved in Chapter 14 that will allow all of us to work together more efficiently as a team- explaining process, strategies with teachers. For parent oral request we will look over records

and if we do not believe that a student requires a formal evaluation we will convene a meeting with the parent to explain our position, their concerns and what the data shows about their progress. We are also denying the parent requests for college purposes. Also, we have contracted with for 230 psychologist days which has helped us keep up. Our psychologist is involved in all RTI meetings, but cannot do other duties and functions--very little counseling is done. Also, we have accepted outside psychiatric placement recommendations in lieu of intermediate unit sources. With our more severe cases (Tier III) we move them into intensive services with a learning support teacher w/o IEPs.

We have made use and provided training, a lot of training on the new request form and all that is involved in the entire process. Instead of going right to "permission to evaluate" form we now use the consent form to gather information together and sit as a team to determine whether the request for an evaluation is justifiable. We are using the request form responsibly. That starts the process to get the team to meet and look at records and have the team to get together and if it looks good, issue the permission form. If a parent requests an evaluation we now have meetings and sit down and discuss with the parent what we're doing and why. It has forced us, as a district, to be more responsible with progress monitoring and data collection. If the data collected looks good we'll issue the "permission to evaluate" form which starts the time. We've also centralized the permission forms through the spec education office. It used to be that we had a public access folder and anyone could download the form and initiate the evaluation process. We took that away. We also want to develop a

move in policy for students coming in with an IEP. We have also issued a few, not many, NOREPS denying evaluation if it didn't look like an appropriate referral. Also getting away from Other Health Impaired (OHI) as a second place prize. We would have some who would recommend OHI if they could find some obscure report stating ADHD--we've gotten away from that tendency. Now it's still an option, but placing a lot more emphasis on using it more appropriately.

Interview Question 9:

What do you believe would represent an unreasonable timeframe imposed by state or federal authorities for the completion of student evaluations?

Six of the seven respondents (86%) indicated that the current 60 calendar days represents an unreasonable timeframe for the completion of student evaluations. Several of these respondents further noted that anything less than the current timeframe would likely result in unhealthy stress levels, poor quality of reports and questionable manageability. One respondent noted that the 60 days is "doable" and stated that she believes that 45 days or less would adversely affect the ability to appropriately evaluate students and determine intervention fidelity. The following response samples underscore these observations:

I think that the 60 day requirement is an unreasonable timeframe imposed by the state. The 60 school day timeframe was more workable, especially when dealing with holiday breaks during the school year (i.e. Christmas, which can be 8-12 days).

Anything less than 60 days would affect my psychologist and myself personally. I don't believe this would be healthy for any of us. It would likely affect our general functioning and reduce the quality of our reports.

The 60 calendar days is unreasonable now. If we had less days I can't imagine how we would be able to manage it realistically and try to do quality services. Where we are now is all we can handle.

Interview Question 10:

Explain the role you serve as part of the evaluative process, and what percentage of time this requires relative to your overall duties.

Six of the seven supervisors (83%) indicated that their role involves attention toward compliance measures to ensure that the regulations governing special education and their timeframes are being conducted appropriately. Six of the respondents additionally noted that they have been involved in some level of district training on the special education changes and/or have taken measures to facilitate team coordination efforts to include parent consultations. Four of the supervisors further noted that they are responsible for tracking procedures which informs them of the district's referral and placement status as well as serving as a liaison to the state for end of the year compliance monitoring. Most of the respondents had difficulty placing a percentage of time allocated toward the evaluation process, but of the five who did, the percentage ranged from 20%-40% of their total time. The following sample responses provide greater insight into the supervisory role:

I am the coordinator of pupil personnel services. This is our 3rd year of response to intervention. I have various responsibilities to include the training of school

personnel responsible for the evaluation, meeting with the teachers, RTI staff, and psychologists. I am responsible for all aspects of special education as well as homebound instruction, gifter support, 504 programming and the homeless. The superintendent wants me to oversee the entire evaluation and RTI process. I meet with parents regularly to go over NOREP. I spend several hours with evaluation per week on phone calls with parents, addressing concerns with parents/staff, etc. RTI has reduced our referrals this year. Last year we were at 73% compliance-- this year is at 100% compliance with timeline.

I am the Supervisor of Student Services. I start with my flowchart book and my student services manual. I've done in-service training and follow-up this past fall about Chapter 14 changes. I did training on pre-referral process with IST, I supervise psychologists. We look at the pre-referrals matrix. I contact parents and pursue files/records--if student is making adequate progress commensurate with peers, we don't test. I have a lot of other roles. I would say that I do spend approx 40% in the evaluative process at some level though because this is where litigation falls. Compliance is a priority.

Summary

Chapter IV included the presentation and preliminary analysis of content of this case study. The information presented and analyzed survey data, individual interview responses from school psychologists, responses from focus group interviews involving school psychologists, and individual interviews conducted with school district supervisors of special education. Each of the respondents' perspectives, beliefs, and reported experiences were analyzed within a framework that focused on patterns relative

to their context and a process of organizational change. Patterns which were reported by a majority of respondents were initially discussed to bolster credibility toward the observed phenomenon. This was followed by more individualistic responses involving work practices. In Chapter V, the survey, individual, and focus group interview questions will be discussed and aligned to address the investigator's research questions. Chapter V will also discuss the research findings in relation to existing literature, review recommendations, and examine implications for further study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Standards-based accountability in public schools requires that all groups of students demonstrate academic mastery in core subject areas by school year 2013-2014 (NCLB, 2001.) In an effort to achieve this goal, states have developed content based standards and have increased assessment practices for progress monitoring. These assessment practices serve to accurately identify those students who are making appropriate academic gains as well as those students who are at greater risk for future failure.

For those students who continue to struggle in achieving benchmark standards after a period of intensive interventions, a referral for a formal evaluation of the student's needs and recommended level of educational programming may be necessary. Chapter 14 special education legislation governs the conduct of initial formal evaluations in Pennsylvania's public schools. In July 2008, Chapter 14 changed the timeframes for the evaluative process from 60 school to 60 calendar days (PDE, 2008.) This reduction of available time may prove daunting to professional practitioners, namely school psychologists and special education supervisors, as they work toward appropriately adapting to this change while striving to provide quality services to the students and families they serve.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this current case study was to explore how school psychologists have adapted to legislative reductions in time allocated for student evaluations. This

study sought to examine modifications to existing work practices implemented during the 2008/2009 school year in conjunction with an examination of the following areas: the potential for decreased participation in continued professional development activities, overall compliance rates, examination of evaluation quality, and effect on the practicing psychologist's allocation of time beyond the regular contracted work day.

This study was motivated by a growing concern among the investigator's professional colleagues regarding the impact the timeframe change may have on the work practices of school psychologists. As such, this study can be utilized to stimulate further professional discourse within the field of education and psychology to explore any issues/problems, work practice patterns, and facilitative factors involved with this change.

The following sections will address the research questions by integrating each of the questions with the multiple data sources presented in Chapter IV. This will be followed by a discussion on the existing literature, recommendations for professional practice, directions for future research, and conclusion.

Research Question One

How does the restricted timeframe governing student evaluations affect the quality of evaluation reports in the South-central public school districts of this study?

The effect of the 60 calendar day timeframe on evaluation quality was explored through an examination of four survey items and three interview questions among the school psychologists involved in this study. The parameters used in determining evaluation quality included administration time, ability to effectively address the referral

question, problems, and needs, and perceptions of present concerns that have potentially strengthened or weakened the evaluative process. These items and questions follow:

Survey Items

Survey Item #1: When selecting a test for an evaluation, brevity of administration is the most important consideration.

Survey Item #2: Evaluation reports are less effective in addressing student referral questions than in previous school years.

Survey Item #6: The evaluation report has been less detailed in addressing student problems/needs as a result of a truncated timeframe.

Survey Item #11: I have reduced the time required to evaluate each student (including observations) as a result of Chapter 14 changes.

Interview Questions

Interview Question #4: Reflecting on the changes in response to Chapter 14 revisions, what concerns do you currently have regarding the amount of time required for student evaluations?

Interview Question #6: To what extent has the evaluative process been strengthened or weakened by the revised time mandate?

Interview Question #7: What are your perceptions regarding the quality of the evaluation report in response to the change in comparison to previous school years?

An analysis of the integrated data from the psychologist respondents of this study illustrates three patterns that the reduction in available time has affected the quality of student evaluations. The first pattern observed was with respect to evaluation time

allocated and selection of test instruments utilized in the conduct of the evaluation. While the psychologists expressed a strong pattern against brevity in test administration, on survey data the majority of psychologists noted that this only pertained to their approach toward cognitive and achievement testing independent of other instruments. That is, while most respondents indicated that they continue to provide comprehensive assessment with respect to the students' intellectual and academic functioning, many respondents report having to partially or completely eliminate additional processing instruments from their assessment arsenal due to timeframe constraints.

Next, while over a third of the survey respondents reported that referral questions and student problems/needs are not being effectively addressed, this pattern was more pronounced during the conduct of the individual interview or focus group discussions. Specifically, 60% of the psychologists interviewed as well as two of the three focus groups do not believe that they have provided the appropriate level of depth or breadth in the conduct of their evaluations and subsequent reports. They noted that the response to intervention approach being adopted in many schools requires sufficient time to evaluate the fidelity of the chosen interventions and that a reduction in the time afforded for the evaluation is counterproductive to this goal.

Finally, the majority of psychologists perceived the reduction in available evaluation time as having impeded a more comprehensive understanding of the student's issues which impact current programming placement decisions, and ultimately serve to delay quality services through subsequent reassessments. The report format was also noted as contributing to the confusion which seemed to affect adjustment. The following excerpt from Jay and Karen respectively illustrates the foregoing patterns:

Kids get re-referred over and over because they're being missed the first time. It is unfortunate because it only takes us longer to get it right and that is time the kid misses in quality instruction. If we do sketchy assessments to meet timelines and paperwork we miss services for children. We then miss the spirit of special education due to the need to push and push--we miss the fidelity of interventions.

The evaluation reports are not up to the standards that I would like for them to be. They're reduced in content, I don't believe that it gives the parent a comprehensive picture of where we are and where we want to go with the child. We truly are the gate-keepers to special education. I get confused easily about where to put information in the report to make your case--where do you make your case? If you do it strictly by the report you don't make your case--it doesn't make sense. I don't do as many recommendations to parents or teachers as I used to do in past years--just don't have the time.

Psychologists exhibited a strong pattern of similarity in how they perceived themselves relative to the quality of the evaluative process. Specifically, the majority of them reported perceiving themselves as compilers of information and gatekeepers to the special education process rather than as critical analysts who employ comprehensive measures to accurately understand the student and his/her issues. Most of the psychologists across interview groups indicated a strong belief that their evaluations are lacking in the necessary thoroughness required of quality work. Among the psychologists individually interviewed, 70% indicated that administrative pressures to conform represent a major concern to the evaluative process in that the legal mandate was reported as taking precedence over practitioner judgment. Such experiences contributed

to a lack of control over the evaluative process in general and feelings of heightened frustration/stress over specific cases. This pattern is accurately represented in the following account:

I do the very basic evaluation. The quality has suffered. All of the running around and getting information has not allowed us to spend quality time with the students. Much has been decided for us due to the available hours to get the job done. I believe that the quality of reports are hurt and the student suffers due to not getting the services he should get.

While the above patterns suggest that evaluation quality has been adversely affected by timeframe reductions it should be noted that 40% of respondents indicated that they have not substantially changed their approach toward student evaluations. These psychologists noted a belief that they could make the necessary work adjustments and reported that they do not believe they have compromised the quality of their evaluations. Most, however, are quick to report that the time required to maintain this appropriate standard has exceeded their contractual school hours.

In an effort to provide additional credibility to the above findings, interview data from special education supervisors was analyzed with respect to this research question. Consistent with the above information 71% of the supervisors noted that the timeframe change has adversely affected the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of the evaluation report. Many of these individuals echoed the concern for fidelity in intervention programming and expressed concern that the timeframe change has been counterproductive to the evaluative process, particularly when referrals are out of the school's control and initiated by parents when teams do not have a great deal of

intervention data to date. In addition, nearly half of the supervisors noted that evaluation quality has been compromised by a lack of appropriate data required for programming decisions. This pattern can be seen in the following excerpt:

Thoroughness and time writing these does impact quality Time is so much less it does have an impact You begin to look for things you could drop out//Is quality compromised? Yes--Sometimes we need to go back and do extra testing but don't have time--completeness suffers. The amount of time that you need to do interventions and data collection, you need that and I don't believe we have that type of data in our reports with the new timeframes. We need more than 60 days.

Nearly 60% of the supervisors further reported perceiving their school psychologists as more pressured to provide a basic evaluation at the cost of performing other critically important functions, such as on-going progress monitoring, counseling, and consultation related to their role. Finally, several supervisors reported that they have not perceived any adverse changes in evaluation quality, but substantiate that this is likely due to the additional time allocated by the psychologist on his/her own time.

These findings align with the occupational work models of change involving demand-control-support factors (McClenahan, et al., 2007) in that the majority of psychologists reported increased levels of pressure and stress in response to a perceived lack of autonomy and controllability for their situation. Both demand-control and demand-control-support models further advocate that those individuals who experience high demands with little to no control experience stress, whereas those in which there is a high level of autonomy are not likely to be stressful even in the presence of high work

demands (Winefield & Jarrett, 2001). It is clear that with regard to student evaluations, most psychologists perceive that this has become a time-centered versus a student-centered process that is governed by bureaucratic regulations.

Research Question Two

How does the regulatory change influence compliance with student evaluations?

The influence of the timeframe change on compliance with student evaluations was determined by examining responses from three survey items as well as in exploring the content patterns of four interview questions among participating school psychologists. These items and questions follow:

Survey Items

Survey Item #7: The multi-disciplinary team struggles in meeting with parents to discuss the evaluation results within the prescribed 60 calendar day period.

Survey Item #8: My district has sub-contracted for additional time in meeting evaluative requirements.

Survey Item #9: The 60 calendar day mandate for evaluations has impeded the execution of other job related duties during the contractual day.

Interview Questions

Interview Question #2: What factors facilitated and/or impeded compliance with the mandated change?

Interview Question #4: Reflecting on the changes in response to Chapter 14 revisions, what concerns do you currently have regarding the amount of time required for student valuations?

Interview Question #5: Have your perceptions changed during the course of the school year relative to the amount of time required for evaluations and, if so, how?

Interview Question #6: To what extent has the evaluative process been strengthened or weakened by the revised time mandate?

An analysis of the multiple data sources indicates that the reduced time allocated for student evaluations has influenced compliance with student evaluations in several ways. Specifically, among the survey respondents, 78% of psychologists interviewed reported that they perceive their multi-disciplinary team “frequently” or “always” struggling to convene within the prescribed 60 day timeframe for the purpose of appropriate educational programming. When exploring the content of interview data among psychologists during individual and group discussions an overwhelming majority of respondents (over 80%) indicated that the 60 day mandate is impeded by holidays and weekends which represent days districts are held accountable but for which students are not in school. This was further corroborated among the majority of supervisors who noted that compliance has been compounded by districts being accountable for days that school personnel have no accessibility to the student. This is reflected in the following excerpts provided by Terry and Ryan respectively:

Holidays and weekends kill us! We lose a lot of time with students on holidays and breaks. There is simply no access to children during these times. Three or four haven't met deadlines and that's a lot for us. We just hired a new psychologist for this year and our LEA is thinking about a fifth psychologist using federal stimulus.

My biggest concern is that this change was made because of the justification that other states are evaluating in fewer days. If you look at these other states, Maryland, for example, they have teachers that are doing academic testing (achievement). Many other states have other staff to do all the other components. When I speak to other psychologists from these states they can't talk comprehensively about kids because they don't know them well enough. We can adapt and be like that. The danger is that you're going to cut things like analysis because you don't have the time, especially now since we are being penalized by all of the holidays and Saturdays/Sundays counting.

A second emergent pattern derived from the data involved the perception that compliance with the 60 day mandate for evaluations is strongly influenced through various time management approaches. Specifically, 70% of the psychologists interviewed separately and all of focus group participants reported that they compensate for the lack of available time by foregoing one or more other job-related competencies in an effort to supplement accessibility to the evaluated student. Most psychologists indicated that direct consultation with parents, student counseling or some other mental health role was strongly compromised by the reduction in time. This trend contrasted with Peeters and Rutte (2005) study that looked at time management as a moderator for the job demand-control interaction of organizational change and stress. Specifically, their findings confirmed that individuals who maintain high time management practices sustain less emotional exhaustion (stress) and greater feelings of personal accomplishment than those who maintain low time management skills even in the presence of high work demands and low autonomy. Based on this finding one may

surmise that an increase of effective time management practices by school psychologists may lead to a more diversified role in lieu of having to give up critical job-related competencies.

The majority of psychologists further noted that their districts do not heavily rely on independent sub-contracting as a solution for evaluative back-logs. Of the few psychologists that reported that their district has sub-contracted for services; such requests were motivated by a referral back-log from the holidays or summer carry over months. The following excerpt by Jan provides additional insight to this pattern:

My fears have come true. Everything that I worried about has happened. There were things that I would like to have done but couldn't due to the time issue. I haven't been as involved in instructional support team meetings. There is a perception that has developed that I'm not as accessible to IST team meetings. There are not as many classroom observations done on my part for testing. We used to do crisis response team meetings in district- we didn't do them this year.

A final prevailing pattern observed across the data involved the perception that compliance with the timeframe is facilitated by administrative priority and/or pressure to conform to legal mandates. While psychologists and district supervisors acknowledge the relevancy of administrative goals in maintaining quality evaluations in conjunction with high compliance rates for student evaluations, 70% of the psychologists interviewed and all three focus groups noted counterproductive circumstances that conflicted with such goals. Specifically, it was reported by all study participants that the additional pressures to conform to a high degree of proficiency with respect to the evaluative process was compounded by a more complicated evaluation report format requiring

additional information. Two of the three focus groups and 40% of psychologists interviewed separately further indicated that compliance is impeded by such factors as difficulty ascertaining intervention effectiveness in a timely manner, and immediate attention required for high risk cases due to their disciplinary nature respectively. The comments below from Brian and Teresa illustrate these patterns:

The state needs to mandate that regular education do everything that they need to do to say that legitimate work in the classroom has been done. You can't answer questions of specific learning disability without this work done. Now you have to go back and get information-it causes the tendency to increase the timeframes.

Less children are eligible due to evaluations not being as thorough or complete so they don't qualify because we didn't have all of the information we needed.

Regular education needs tightened up-curriculum and program centered core I interventions-we're not doing all we can! The only one to go into action is the school psych when a referral is generated. We demanded more in the evaluation in less time.

Well we have had to develop a corrective action plan on timelines given the problems last year and this is a continual area of concern that we need to make sure is being followed effectively. It is one of the new superintendent's priorities and I have to answer to it.

Research Question Three

To what extent has the reduced timeframe contributed to additional work beyond the contractual work day in response to the mandated regulatory change.

This question was addressed by examining the data from survey item five in conjunction with interview questions three, four, and nine. The survey data and responses to these questions were used to frame the nature and extent of additional work beyond the typical work day that was performed in response to the change. The analysis and participant responses reflect patterns derived from the individual and focus group data in order to provide additional credibility in addressing this phenomenon. The survey and interview questions follow:

Survey Item

Survey Item #5: The 60 school to calendar day revision has necessitated additional work in my evenings and/or weekends.

Interview Questions

Interview Question #3: To what extent has the change in evaluation time contributed to additional work beyond the contractual school day?

Interview Question #4: Reflecting on the changes in response to Chapter 14 revisions, what concerns do you currently have regarding the amount of time required for student evaluations?

Interview Question #9: What do you believe would represent an unreasonable timeframe imposed by state or federal authorities for the completion of student evaluations?

An analysis of the psychologists' individual and focus group responses indicate that the change in evaluative timeframe has contributed to additional work beyond their contractual work day. While 33% of the study participants indicated that they

“sometimes” spend additional time in their non-school hours performing work-related functions, 67% of individual psychologists interviewed reported that they “frequently” or “always” perform additional work in their evenings, weekends or during their lunch periods. A consistent pattern was further observed among focus group participants. Within these groups 89% reported that they “frequently” or “always” perform extra work in their off-duty time while 11% indicated that this occurs “sometimes.” Most of the study group participants reported an average of at least 30-45 minutes per evening to as much as 2-3 hours per evening. Of the supervisors who were interviewed over 70% reported that the change has resulted in additional work within the context of their school day while 43% stated that it has created additional work beyond school hours largely spent preparing for staff trainings, following-up with parent communications or ensuring the appropriateness of teacher reported intervention efforts.

Most of the psychologists reported that the reduced time for the conduct of student evaluations has either compromised evaluation depth or breadth or narrowed the diversity of their role within the school environment. This was corroborated among the supervisors where nearly 60% reported a lack of role diversity among their school psychologist as their primary concern. Most of the interviewed psychologists noted that the additional time and work performed on their personal time is generally devoted toward the completion of report writing, performance of another critical competency such as the development of a behavior support plan, or attention toward communication follow-up such as checking and responding to emails or voicemails. Nearly all of the psychologists who commit to additional work beyond normal school hours report a need to do this in response to pressures to comply within applicable timeframes. Furthermore,

80% of the psychologists individually interviewed, 86% of supervisors interviewed, and all three focus group respondents reported that they perceive the current 60 calendar day timeframe as an unreasonable timeframe imposed for the completion of student evaluations.

This is important as research on self-efficacy beliefs notes that a high sense of self-efficacy has been demonstrated to have a positive influence on productivity rates (Martin, et al., 2005). Specifically, a person's efficacy expectancy about their ability to perform new behaviors is an important determinant of adjustment in organizational change theory. Such efficacy expectancy exerts a strong influence on a person's assessment of a situation as challenging or threatening (Bandura, 1982; Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999).

Overall, the findings of this research question illustrate that psychologists have compensated for the change in available evaluation time by allocating additional hours of their personal time toward the fulfillment of their work-related functions. The following sample responses underscore these findings:

I am putting in additional time--bringing a lot of work home. On average at least 90 minutes each night. Lunches are out as well--I'm burned out working on multiple reports every night--I just can't get it done during the day.

I was blessed with an intern who did a lot of work for me. I did a lot of systemic work for response to intervention such as data analysis I did on weekends. I developed an in-service program at night but the counselor presented it during the day because I had to be at MDT/IEP meetings so my other functions fell in the eve's because my testing/evaluation was done during the day.

The results of a large metropolitan focus group reported by six respondents: 3 hours a night plus some extra on weekend . . . 8-10 hours on the weekend . . . 2 hours a weekday . . . 2 hours a weekday . . . 2 hours a weekday . . . 1-2 hours/day We have added an extra psych this year.

Yes I have devoted additional time due to the change. Just orchestrating and coordinating with 69 teachers, supervisors, and psychologists in making sure that the magnitude of information is being conveyed consistently. I can't really place a number on it. Just staying on top of everything is a challenge. I know the psychologists are working in their evenings writing reports -their emails attest to that. I worry about my psychologists becoming test machines. I empathize for our psychologists. I worry that testing will take too much of their time and that they will not be able to attend to some other critical functions. I am respectfully concerned about the manageability of the evaluation, particularly when secondary information is more difficult to get and they have to get it to the parent in 50 days. I'd be very concerned about anything less than where we are now. I'd be greatly concerned if the timeframe goes down from now -it would cause problems with quality control and a huge manageability problem.

Research Question Four

What practices have school psychologists and other school leaders implemented or changed, including professional development activities, in fulfilling their responsibilities as it relates to student evaluations?

This question was addressed by examining participant responses to four survey items and three interview questions. The content of the psychologists' responses were grouped for specific patterns that illustrate specific work practice changes related to the evaluative process. The items and questions follow:

Survey Items

Survey Item #3: I have chosen to forego professional development opportunities due to timeframe constraints imposed by the 60 day modification mandate.

Survey Item #4: The revised timeframe for evaluations has served to decrease communications with parents and teachers.

Survey Item #8: My district has sub-contracted for additional time in meeting evaluative requirements.

Survey Item #10: My team has struggled in developing successful educational practices in response to the timeframe change.

Interview Questions

Interview Question #1: How has the timeframe change governing student evaluations affected your practice?

Interview Question #8: What formal or informal policies have been instituted since July, 2008 to assist a smooth adjustment resulting from the timeframe change?

Interview Question #10: Explain the role you serve as part of the evaluative process, and what percentage of time this requires relative to your overall professional duties.

An examination of the multiple data across survey, individual interview, and focus groups respondents indicates school psychologists and special education supervisors have made modifications and/or changes to their existing work practices in response to the timeframe change governing student evaluations. Specifically, 44% of psychologists interviewed individually and 56% of focus group respondents reported “always” or “frequently” foregoing professional development opportunities as well as struggling in developing successful educational practices in response to the timeframe change. This is consistent with the interview and focus group data which suggest that psychologists generally perceive their role as having become less diversified in response to the lack of available evaluation time. Specifically, the majority of respondents indicate that other core competencies related to the school psychology profession have become compromised in an effort to compensate for additional time required toward regulation compliance. Most of the psychologists reported a paradigm shift in their role from critical analyst, where problems are student centered, to data compiler where the evaluative process is more time centered and serve to focus on gate-keeping functions for solely determining special education eligibility. The observation of a narrowed role is supported by the percentage of time reported in the execution of their duties which range from 75% to 90%.

Furthermore, while 44% of the psychologists individually interviewed indicated that the change has either “always” or “frequently” served to decrease communications with parents and teachers, 78% of the focus group respondents indicated that the change has served to impede communications with parents and teachers only “sometimes.” One explanation for this discrepancy may be that the psychologists interviewed individually

seemed to refer to direct and personal communications as important, while the focus group respondents seemed to acknowledge a broader means of communication such as email or report forms as acceptable communications. Generally, the focus group psychologists appeared to perceive communication more broadly in their detailed discussions.

Ironically, the majority of special education supervisors reported an increase of communications with teachers through increased staff trainings. This was largely motivated to inform school staff of changes, expectations, and any new procedures for the purpose of developing appropriate data for evaluation reports and maintaining compliance with the mandated timeframe change. Likewise, the majority of supervisors reported an increase in communication with parents to elaborate on pre-referral goals and methods of progress monitoring. Most of the supervisors reported perceiving themselves as accountable for compliance with the Chapter 14 changes, and indicated a vulnerability to litigation should school personnel fail to comply with the changes.

When discussing the issue of sub-contracting professional sources as a means to adjust to the testing demands, none of the individual psychologists interviewed and only 11% of the focus group psychologists reported this as a common work practice response. Such a pattern supports the concept that outsourcing is not typically used as a viable alternative in adjusting to change relative to the reduction of available time for student evaluations. This was further corroborated by the majority of supervisors interviewed who noted they have not used outside sources as a typical response to workload demands.

When specific workplace practices were examined with respect to fulfilling evaluative responsibilities, several consistent patterns were observed across the data.

Specifically, the majority of individual respondents and two of the three focus groups reported that they have attempted to streamline the reason for referral question(s) in an effort to better inform test selection and address the areas of concern. Such an approach has served to encourage individuals and teams to more specifically define the nature of the existing problem for the purpose of a more targeted assessment. A related pattern was conveyed by the majority of the special education supervisors who noted an emphasis on the revision of pre-referral screening materials in the interest of communicating better information related to the students' educational problems.

Other effective practices that have been identified by the majority of psychologists include the use of report templates, heavier reliance on pre-referral team data, and refinement of specific screening processes for gifted and reevaluation referrals. These mechanisms, along with more reliance on technology tools such as performance tracker and email, have been reported to aid in appropriate time management. Finally, many of the psychologists and supervisors reported that staggering referrals around the holidays and summer as well as centralizing procedures through the special education office have served as effective practices in the management and control of the evaluative process.

Overall, the findings of this research question illustrate that approximately half of the school psychologists involved in this study have changed their work-related practices through decreased professional development participation and parent/teacher communications. These findings, in concert with the perception of a narrowed professional role, suggests that the psychologists have adjusted to the timeframe change by compromising other related aspects of their job in an attempt to acquire additional

time for evaluation purposes. The following excerpts underscore these patterns of changed work practices and adjustment:

Ninety percent of my role is testing--that's huge! Prior to the 60 day change, I was much more involved in team planning and interventions. Huge role change! I used to take advantage of professional development opportunities, now I don't go to any at all. I used to welcome people in my office, but it has created a mindset change when people come in I ask "What do you want?" I guess I'm suspicious of others motives when all they want to do is talk.

I don't access nearly as much reading from professional literature. It has also affected my practice as I push myself harder and my professional development days are cut-out. I don't feel we can give up time to attend professional development. Emails have significantly helped. We use a back-pack secretary where things are more centralized which has helped. At elementary level we put a lot on IST to gather information and classroom observations. I still use modified "cut and paste" for my evaluation template but then individualize it with specific results.

I've developed templates for different tests to save time. They're "skeletal" types and I fill them in with specific data later. I have also started focusing on the reason for referral more diligently. I have also used our performance tracker as a technology tool and have used district resources such as IST teacher who collects all of the information in the folder. I regret that we're the compilers- now I'm the compiler at the secondary level and have to chase the nurse, speech, O.T. etc.

I've done one day in-service and follow-up this past fall about Chapter 14 changes. I did training on pre-referral process with IST. I supervise psychologists. We look at pre-referral matrix. I contact parents and pursue files/records. If student is making adequate progress commensurate with peers, we don't test. I have a lot of other roles. I would say that I do spend approx 40% in the evaluative process at some level though because this is where litigation falls. Compliance is a priority! We have had to get tough. If interventions haven't been done we will require it. We have developed a comprehensive pre-referral matrix and have revised testing criteria for parent/physician request. We have also adjusted testing information; you can't put a child for an evaluation in May or September for testing. We hold off gifted testing until summer time.

Relationship of Research Findings to Existing Literature

The findings of the research questions regarding how school psychologists have adjusted to the evaluative timeframe changes relate closely to the professional literature with respect to best practice models, team-based approaches, and research on organizational change. Specifically, the analysis and findings of the four research questions indicates several important trends requiring further discussion. Most notably, the response patterns clearly suggest that the majority of psychologists perceive the timeframe governing student evaluations as contributing to a reduced capacity to comprehensively understand the magnitude of student issues impending on the educational problem(s). This perception is further supported by the observation from most psychologists that the quality of the evaluative process has been compromised by a lack of depth and breadth of the evaluation and subsequent report. The lack of

depth/breadth results from the partial or complete reduction of supplemental instruments designed to ascertain specific underlying processing functions (e.g. attention) that may be contributing to the student's difficulty learning or responding appropriately to intervention. Many of the psychologists reported not having the additional time to administer supplemental tests to inform instructional design and instead relied more heavily on the basic, standard battery to address sole eligibility questions. Effective instructional design and intervention can be implemented when a student's basic psychological processes as well as knowledge and skills are known (Peverly, 1994.) According to Naglieri and Ashman (1999) knowing the cognitive capacities or deficits of a student represents a critical element of assessment that leads to effective learning. Present day instruction is most useful when it teaches students to plan, think, inquire, evaluate, and reflect and suggests that knowledge and skills as well as the cognitive dimensions of learning are relevant in the classroom (Naglieri, 2002; Scheid, 1993.)

Assessing and understanding one or more of the basic underlying psychological processes is paramount for psychologists to contribute to effective intervention planning, as well as in determining whether or not a student possesses a more severe educational impairment such as a specific learning disability. As Olefish (2006) suggests educators need to understand the underlying causes of instructional problems in addition to an individual's response to intervention in determining appropriate diagnostic categories (specific learning disability) for educational programming according to the law.

A second prolific trend from the multiple data sources included the perception of a narrowed professional role by the school psychologists involved in this study. Most of the psychologists report a heightened pressure to conform to administrative priorities for

compliance relative to student evaluations, and have responded by compromising one or more other critically important job-related competencies such as their mental health, professional development or direct collaborative role. Many of the study participants reported dissatisfaction with their overall role and expressed concern over their perceived lack of diversification. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2006), school psychologists are required to be proficient in eight relevant domain areas.

These include:

1. Interpersonal and Collaborative Skills;
2. Delivery Service and Sensitive Service Delivery;
3. Technological Applications;
4. Professional, Legal, Ethical and Social Responsibility;
5. Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability;
6. Systems-Based Service Delivery;
7. Enhancing the Development of Cognitive and Academic Skills; and,
8. Enhancing the Development of Wellness, Social Skills and Life Competencies.

The eight domains of competence are defined as separate skill and knowledge sets with the goal of improving student competence and building systems capacity. The first four domains represent foundational competencies which sustains training and practice in school psychology. The latter four competencies represent functional domains that characterize the process and context within the profession of school psychology and how the work is executed. Ysseldyke, et al. (2006) indicate that in order to achieve effective learner outcomes within a three-tiered service delivery model, school psychologists must possess the psychological and educational knowledge sets as well as evidence-based

theories, guidelines and methods to facilitate individual and system changes. These knowledge sets contribute toward successful problem-solving to create, evaluate and apply empirically validated interventions to affect positive educational outcomes. For school psychologists to be effective on a daily basis they must understand and exercise in-depth knowledge in each of the above domains as well as apply their skill sets fluently in their practice (Ysseldyke, et al., 2006).

It was apparent to this investigator that the majority of psychologist respondents of this study perceived themselves as solely “psychometricians” performing gate-keeping functions (see domain area #5) at the exclusion of the remaining critical domains.

Additional prevalent trends that were derived from the multiple source data throughout this study included the reliance on district psychologists to complete the evaluative process within applicable timeframes and contractual hours, decreased professional development participation among psychologists, and concern over the fidelity of school-based interventions.

In response to the pressures of getting the evaluation completed, many of the psychologists reported working well beyond their contractual school day and into their personal time to complete evaluations. According to Lichtenstein and Fischetti (1998), school psychologists, in seeking to diversify their roles, need to develop effective time-management skills, while school districts need to maintain adequate staffing levels to ensure that psychologists can allocate sufficient time to core competencies other than assessment functions. Further, the lack of independent sub-contracting for additional psychological time for assessment is related to concerns which suggests that privatization for services are subject to minimized evaluation time and omission of essential

components (e.g. observation of the student, interviews with teachers) that are not regarded by the contractor as important to the final report (Canter & Dryden, 1993).

Carney and Stiefel (2008) further indicate that the formal assessment process, to include recommended services provided to children deemed “at risk” for academic failure, must include appropriate evaluation of evidence-based, multi-tiered interventions in order to be in compliance with federal law. Determination of intervention effectiveness generally involves a recursive process of selection, modification and evaluation of the instructional-intervention match among relevant team members. While all of the respondents perceived a student’s response to intervention as an important part of the assessment process, a substantial number of psychologists did not believe they have sufficient time to allocate toward determining intervention effectiveness, and further question the fidelity in which many interventions are being carried out due to perceived time constraints. As Reschly (2005) suggests, the manner in which school personnel determine what appropriate instruction constitutes in a response to intervention model, with respect to the duration of implementation and treatment fidelity, will be challenging. Nonetheless, it is the role of the multi-disciplinary, problem-solving team to ensure that the integrity of the intervention is being carried out as intended if it is to be objectively evaluated and determined as successful for the student’s learning outcome (Burns, Wiley, & Viglietta, 2008).

Consistent with the research on organizational change theory, self-efficacy beliefs, and time management skills appeared to be effective adjustment factors for a minority of psychologists in this study relative to their perception of providing quality evaluative services. These psychologists reported a belief and confidence that they could

continue to provide a quality evaluative report through adaptations in their time management style which included frequent use of pre-referral team data when available, strategic employment of technology, and concessions in other job-related functions.

Overall, the research of Peeters and Rutte (2005) on the demand-control models of work adjustment applies well to this group of psychologists in that high work demands and low autonomy contribute to increased frustration unless it can be successfully mediated through the effective use of time. Further, the reported use of technology contributed toward effective time management as it applied to the evaluative process. As Silbergliitt (2008) suggests, technology can permit quick access to individual student data, summaries of group-level information, and analyses of educational data which all serve to inform instructional data-based decision making.

Finally with regard to respondents' perceptions of reduced professional development opportunities, Darling-Hammond (2004) indicates that school systems are likely to have better learner outcomes when there is an investment in educators' knowledge and skill sets which she defines as professional accountability versus bureaucratic or legal accountability which seeks to comply with legislative demands, rules, and regulations according to a set of procedures.

Recommendations for Professional Practice

With the growing emphasis on high stakes assessment and data-based accountability within school systems, school psychologists will best support student based outcomes by acquiring and applying their competencies across a number of domains to include problem analysis, assessment, consultation, and intervention programming (Christ, 2008). According to the National Association of School

Psychology (2006) previous surveys among psychologist practitioners have reported their perceived lack in skill in indirect service delivery, including prevention and consultation, even though respondents expressed a desire to engage more frequently in these core functions. Unfortunately, a large percentage of psychologists within this current study perceived their professional role as having become increasingly truncated in response to regulatory time constraints governing student evaluations. In an effort to strengthen diversification among practitioners as well as inform transitional strategies the following recommendations are offered. These recommendations are additionally designed to facilitate effective time management skills and a successful transitional adjustment to organizational change.

Establish goals and assist in developing appropriate training to extend the data based team concept to the secondary level. While there exists a plethora of research (Carney & Stiefel, 2008; Hollinger, 2003; Kovaleski & Glew, 2006) detailing the successful educational outcomes of elementary students from pre-referral and response to intervention teams, systematic team planning utilizing evidence-based academic accommodations with secondary students is lacking. Given the respondents' perceptions of compromised evaluative quality (lack of appropriate depth/breadth in understanding student's learning issues), it is possible that students whose learning deficits are not adequately identified at the elementary level, due to an over-reliance in timeframe conformity, may encounter further academic difficulties as they progress into middle and high school. However, many of the curriculum progress monitoring and assessment materials utilized by instructional support teams (e.g. Curriculum based assessment probes, Diagnostic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) are not applicable beyond

the sixth grade level, leaving secondary planning teams groping for materials to assess academic benchmark performance standards and progress monitoring results. Most secondary intervention approaches are oriented toward behavioral programming and this was further reinforced among the study participants.

Psychologist practitioners are encouraged to develop increased team building capacity among their teachers, administrators, and support staff by developing guidelines and procedures that emphasize the use of systematic academic interventions, consultation and progress monitoring to inform appropriate educational outcomes. In doing so, they are likely to elicit the assistance of other educators in addressing the multiple components of the evaluation report thereby enabling them to allocate more time working on the depth/breadth of the evaluation as well as serving as critical analysts.

Administrative and supervisory personnel are encouraged to develop increased partnerships with local colleges and universities for the purpose of acquiring school psychology interns. The utilization of interns could help balance the time constraints of the evaluative process and ultimately serve to achieve equitable distribution among core professional competencies. Ysseldyke, et al. (2006) indicates that school psychologists have reported an over-emphasis of time on special education eligibility assessments, and experience dissonance between training expectations and actual job roles which may account for the mobility within and attrition out of the field. It is predicted that the future of school psychologist professionals will experience a shortage in filling critical demands through the year 2020 (Yesseldyke, 2006). Given this forecast, school district and intermediate unit leadership who plan accordingly by developing “training to practice” partnerships may place themselves in an advantageous position by having a consistent

professional pool of psychologist interns to serve. Trained interns could assist by being located in traditionally high assessment locations. By fulfilling this role the intern and supervising practitioner psychologist could work toward a greater diversification by balancing their time among the critical core competencies within the profession. At the conclusion of the yearly internship the school district or intermediate unit could back-fill any retiring/resigning positions by hiring the intern psychologist to a full term position.

Development of a county wide consortium comprised of practicing school psychologists and interns. The goal of this recommendation is to share resources across the county during times of critical need (e.g. high referral rate during holiday season). By pooling resources, psychologists from one location could support another school district during periods of high assessments, crisis situations, and professional development trainings during any part of the school year with the expectation that equal reciprocal time would be returned in some capacity to the supporting district during another period of the school year. Such a program may enable practitioners with little experience to work along with a more experienced psychologist during a more critical incident such as a crisis response following a suicide or death of a student/staff member. In an effort to facilitate response time, this consortium could align critical district needs with available psychologists' strengths thereby enhancing time management by remediating the need as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Provide continuous professional development training to principals, teachers and instructional support team staff regarding improvement of the evaluative process. In an effort to improve both quality of evaluation and compliance to the mandated timeframe, principals and/or special education supervisors are encouraged to allocate a small part of

each faculty meeting or in-service presentation toward some aspect of the evaluative process. Such an approach embeds student evaluations into the school district's culture and places it in equitable terms with the curriculum and instructional priorities.

Discussion may take the form of addressing specific strategies in gathering detailed pre-referral data from teachers or related service providers, the importance of prioritizing evaluations over routine classroom schedules, the need to direct any potential formal referrals through a centralized point of contact (e.g. principals or special education office) in an effort to manage the referral properly while offsetting any miscommunications, and the need to stagger referrals to prevent the creation of a bottleneck situation and scheduling difficulties. The advantages of this approach is that it reinforces a team approach concept by placing responsibility on other members of the multidisciplinary team, shifts the psychologist role to information analyst versus information compiler, and improves the progression or flow of referrals.

Integrate technology into aspects of assessment. As one of the espoused foundational competencies of school psychology, technology has never been more important in the delivery of educational services (NASP, 2006.) In addition to the time management practices reported by the study respondents (i.e. use of email, word processing systems, performance tracker or MMS) several other technological applications could be utilized in an effort to increase role diversification, support quality of evaluation, and achieve high compliance rates. Specifically, the use of digital voice recorders, electronic report writing tools, access to e-learning systems as a conduit to increased professional development, and utilization of instructional management and assessment systems could all be used to enhance the professional functioning in domains

involving data gathering and storage, progress monitoring student performance, communication and records maintenance (McLeod & Ysseldyke, 2008). Other applications such as an expansion of WEBIEP templates and automated referral logging systems could be used to expedite the processing of referrals thereby providing services to students in a timelier manner.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest the need for further research with respect to practitioner adjustment to change policy involving evaluative timeframes. While this study supports a general trend illustrating the adverse impact the revised timeframe change has had on quality of evaluation, practitioner personal time, and professional role diversification, the modification of the evaluation report itself has also been implicated as having a contributing role in adjustment difficulties. Specific report format changes have included additional components involving instructional practices, recommendations, and teacher qualifications as well as extended discussion involving students referred for or believed to possess a specific learning disability. Further studies ascertaining the effect of time on adjustment, independent of other co-occurring changes, may provide greater insight of desired or unintended consequences to state administrators responsible for considering the promulgation of future changes.

Next, problem-solving teams employing systematic academic interventions need to be further explored at the secondary level. While secondary teams have become increasingly skilled with functional behavioral assessments and supporting behavior intervention plans, research based academic accommodations are lacking which was a consistent finding of this current study. Conventional wisdom has dictated that by the

time a student reached the secondary level he/she has already been properly diagnosed of any academic skill deficit or disability. Unfortunately, practitioners who compromise the depth/breadth of their evaluation or those who do not perceive themselves as having the necessary time for critical analysis of evaluative data, in the interest of regulation compliance, may be increasingly vulnerable to overlook students who may present with academic processing issues. As such, these students will likely struggle and require further professional scrutiny at the middle or high school levels. Secondary teams who employ both academic and behavioral interventions in response to demonstrable school failure are likely to increase the chances for greater student outcomes as well as provide the evaluating practitioner with more useful and timely data similar to the pre-referral team at the elementary level.

Finally, further research is needed to differentiate between regular education intensive interventions (tier three) and specially designed accommodations under the guise of special education to strengthen practitioner judgment regarding the need for more restrictive educational programming. The response to intervention model is predicated on the assumption that those students who do not respond adequately to tier three (intensive) interventions within the regular education milieu are appropriate candidates for special education referrals. While this may or may not be true, tier three interventions are often analogous to specially designed accommodations in core team planning. Future research should strive to identify a separate set of accommodations that have had effective results within the special education setting for a particular deficit/disability (e.g. phonological processing coupled with executive function impairment). With this approach a more responsible and reliable response to intervention

model outcome may exist that fulfills a dual set of criteria. These criteria would include the lack of appropriate student response to tier three (regular education) interventions while conversely demonstrating the appropriate response to the specially designed (special education) accommodations. Until further differentiation of interventions is developed and implemented, placement of students in special education based on the unitary factor of failing to respond to tier three programming alone may be an erroneous assumption and in contrast to the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment as outlined in IDEA, 2004.

Conclusion

This study served in acquiring a better understanding on how school psychologists and special education supervisors perceived and adjusted to the regulatory change governing the student evaluation process. Furthermore, it discussed specific work approaches that have enabled psychologists to compensate for the resource constraint of time in performing their duties more efficiently. A conceptual framework outlined by Hatch (2002) was utilized in defining typologies that was based on this case studies research questions and goals. Individual adjustment was examined in relationship to the environmental (work) context of the practitioner's school assignment as well as exploring the particular process of organizational change. Based on this in-depth examination and convergence of the data the following overarching themes/patterns were determined:

Overall, school psychologists perceived themselves as largely performing a "gatekeeping" role. There was a general belief that the evaluation reports lack the necessary depth/breadth which ultimately leads to a lack of understanding of student issues affecting learning problems. Such observations further contributed to a lack of

diversification of their professional role. Factors that adversely influenced compliance rates included accountable time during holidays and weekends that students are not in school but for which time school districts are accountable. Additionally, there was a strong perception for more effective time management that would allow school psychologists to fulfill all of their core competencies. Currently, this study substantiates that psychologists are foregoing other core competency functions to supplement diagnostic demands. Supervisors of special education further shared a common perception that school psychologists have narrowed their professional role in an effort to comply with their diagnostic competency. There was also a strong perception that compliance is compounded by additional factors, namely more complicated formatting questions. Independent sub-contracting for services was not a common approach taken to address the legal timeframe mandate.

Another salient finding involved the extent to which psychologists worked beyond the contractual school day. Specifically, there was a strong perception that the timeframe change has greatly contributed to additional work on personal time creating heightened stress. This additional time appeared to be devoted in response to experiencing a strong administrative pressure to comply with the 60 day mandate. Finally, this study discussed school psychologist's perceptions of limited professional development opportunities in response to feeling pressured to comply with testing demands. A strong perception of a paradigm shift from critical analyst to information compiler was further shared by the majority of study participants. Several common work practice changes in response to the reduced timeframe have included: stream-lining reason for referral questions, staggering

referrals; particularly around holidays, revision of pre-referral screening materials and heavy reliance on pre-referral teams and available technology.

The course of workplace adjustment that was taken by the participants in this study represents an initial set of responses that were perceived to assist with the transformational process of change. Nonetheless, changes brought on by legislative initiatives are likely to be fraught with a number of obstacles prior to evolving into innovative practice. There is credibility in what the participants in this study have advocated, through words and deeds, as they seek improvement in the larger school context. With continued examination and professional discourse of this phenomenon perhaps the theoretical path to no child left behind will become a functional reality to the educators, families and policy makers involved in the process.

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