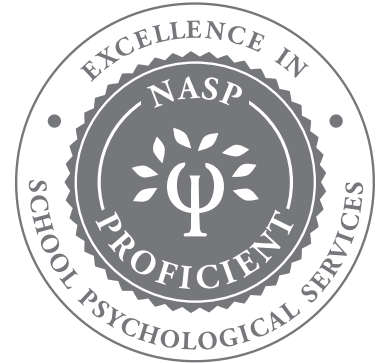


# Spotlight on Heartland Area Education Agency

BY BRIAN MCKEVITT

Despite being tasked with supporting the needs of almost one third of the students in Iowa, Heartland Area Education Agency exemplifies best practices thanks to a commitment to implementing a problem-solving process, evidence-based practices, and the NASP Practice Model.



*The NASP Communications and Practice Model Committees aim to demystify the leadership and advocacy steps required to create systemic change by highlighting the districts recognized through the 2023 Excellence in School Psychological Services (ESPS) program and the concrete actions they took to achieve change. More about the ESPS program can be found at [www.nasponline.org/esps](http://www.nasponline.org/esps).*

**HEARTLAND AREA EDUCATION AGENCY (AEA)**, located in central Iowa, is an intermediate education agency funded by federal and state aid to provide a variety of services to local school districts. Heartland is one of nine AEAs that serve school districts throughout Iowa. Heartland serves 53 public school districts and 30 accredited nonpublic schools, representing approximately 149,000 students, or roughly 30% of the student population in Iowa. Services for districts provided by Heartland include special education support, media and technology services, curriculum and instruction support, and professional development.

School psychologists in Heartland typically work under the special education support umbrella of the agency, with 115 school psychologists working in the AEA at a ratio of approximately 1 school psychologist for every 1,100 students. Heartland has a long history of innovation in school psychology through use of the problem-solving framework, response to intervention, and noncategorical service delivery since the early 1990s. In 2023, Heartland was recognized at the Proficient level for the ESPS program, celebrating the agency's success with meeting the diverse needs of so many school districts and its commitment to the problem-solving process, evidence-based practices,

and the NASP Practice Model. Notably, Heartland is the first intermediate education agency to receive ESPS recognition.

## Meeting the Challenges of Service Delivery

School psychologists in Heartland have the monumental task of providing a breadth of academic, behavioral, and mental health services while managing the unique needs of 53 rural and suburban school districts. They strive to provide high-quality services but need to be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the specific districts to which they are assigned. Thus, each district uses its school psychologists in slightly different ways. In some districts, especially rural ones, school psychologists often have a systemic role and are involved in many aspects of the district's functioning, such as professional learning and district-level data analysis. In others, school psychologists work closely with special educators to provide specialized or traditional services, such as individual behavior supports or comprehensive evaluation on complex cases.

Having school psychologists perform different tasks across the agency is seen as both a challenge and a strength. Districts with diverse needs create opportunities for Heartland's school psychologists to bring their unique skill sets to their assignments. They can find a system that capitalizes on their strengths, thus contributing to a more positive overall working climate. This is consistent with NASP Practice Model Organizational Principle 2, which speaks to the importance of school systems promoting work environments that maximize job satisfaction. Still, consistency in practice across the agency can be challenging since districts often want different things from their school psychologists.

## Building Consistency in Practice

Though individual school psychologists' roles may vary depending on the district, the agency grounds its practice on a data-based problem-solving model (See Figure 1) and the use of evidence-based practices. Every staff member has extensive training in the problem-solving model and is required to use it as the foundational approach to addressing system- and individual-level needs. In fact, Iowa state special education law *requires* the use of the problem-solving model for special education evaluation. Thus, the model is used extensively by school psychologists—districts know it and expect it.

**Editor's note:** As this article goes to press, legislators in Iowa are quickly advancing a bill that has the potential to drastically change the 50-year-old AEA system in Iowa. The services that Heartland AEA provides as described here, as well as the services provided by all the AEAs across the state, may look different pending the outcome of the legislation. For more information, follow House File 2612 at <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/>.

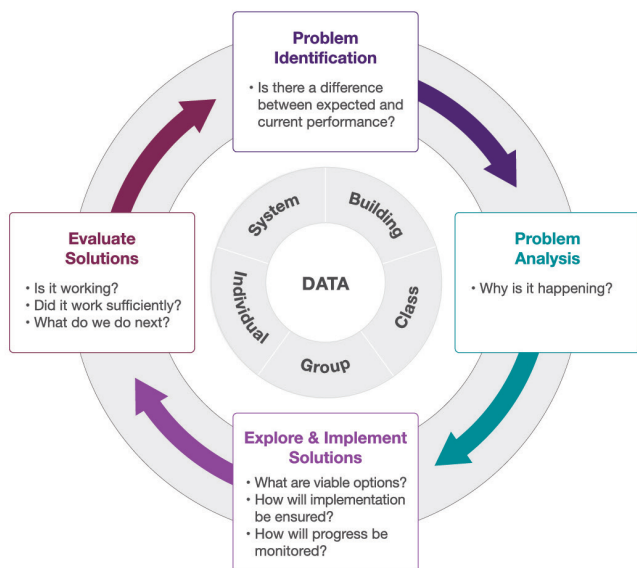
Furthermore, regional directors in the agency reinforce policies and procedures related to the problem-solving process with the school districts. They support school psychologists if there is pushback against Heartland policies or procedures. Common complaints from districts might be that the process takes too long or requires too much work. However, given the importance of the model for identifying what works to enhance student outcomes, such protests are often resolved once districts see the success of the model in action.

Evidence-based practices are also at the core of school psychologists' work. Districts sometimes may request a service that is not aligned with research-based practices. As such, Heartland school psychologists work hard to meet districts where they are, while striving for evidence-based practices using a collaborative approach. The school psychologists sometimes must engage in challenging conversations to ensure that a district's practices are aligned with the evidence-based practices that Heartland espouses. Ongoing professional development around coaching, collaboration, and consultation, along with professional development on technical skills, helps the school psychologists know how to navigate these sticky situations.

### The Importance of Teaming, Collaboration, and Consultation

Difficult situations are also mitigated by the agency's team-based approach. School psychologists are not isolated in their work and don't have to promote best practices alone. They have their directors and other school psychologists in the agency to rely on, as well as their building- and district-based team members. Building and district teams typically consist of a school psychologist, school social worker, and a special education consultant (a veteran special education teacher). The multidisciplinary team structure enhances the services that the agency provides because of the expertise the team brings to each building and district. Each member of the team brings a slightly different background and lens to the team's work, thus enhancing the likelihood of positive outcomes for students and bringing a unified voice to promote the agency's values.

FIGURE 1. PROBLEM SOLVING FRAMEWORK



With the help of their teams, school psychologists promote their comprehensive role as outlined in the NASP Practice Model. At Heartland, school psychologists do not provide a lot of direct service; instead, services are delivered primarily through a collaborative consultation model. They work with teachers to use the problem-solving model, implement interventions, and evaluate outcomes. They promote equitable practices by sharing data with teachers and encouraging them to evaluate their own teaching practices. They promote safe and supportive schools by consulting with administrators on school-wide initiatives that promote positive behaviors and mental health. The value of school psychologists in Heartland is demonstrated repeatedly by the broad range of services they are asked to provide.

### Measuring Success

Serving so many school districts makes it difficult to measure the success of Heartland's school psychologists. Each district has its own data that are used to measure successful outcomes. Some data look at child find numbers and evaluation outcomes. Other data address student performance in each district and then are aggregated to Heartland as a whole. But the real success of Heartland's school psychologists is measured internally. School psychologists make an annual portfolio that demonstrates the services they provide. In their portfolios, they provide evidence for how their services align with each domain of the NASP Practice Model. Their evaluation is tied to the model, thus showing the agency's commitment to their comprehensive role.

### Moving Forward

Heartland school psychologists want to stay innovative. Agency leaders provide ongoing professional development to keep practitioners up to date and to encourage practices that are forward thinking. They give staff members permission to try new things that have the potential for positive impact, and they encourage data collection to show that impact. They cultivate new leaders by identifying school psychologists doing great things who can influence the work of others across the agency, even if they are not in administrative roles. One example of this leadership is a job role called "job alike facilitator" that encourages school psychologists to support other school psychologists, consultants, and social workers, much like an instructional coach for those positions. The role gives school psychologists time to support peers, develop trainings, and enhance the professional growth and visibility of school psychologists in the agency.

Of course, as in so many other regions of the country, there are workforce shortages in Heartland that create barriers to engaging in the comprehensive role. However, to address this issue, Heartland has a workgroup on recruitment and retention that thinks of new and unique ways to recruit a diverse workforce. School psychologists in Heartland are excited about the positive culture they have cultivated and the opportunities that are provided to them in this unique work environment. With this in mind, Heartland will continue their long history of cutting-edge practices when it comes to school psychology service delivery. ●

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