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Part-Time Work as a School Psychologist

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U.S. News and World Report recently rated school psychology as one of the 25 best careers for 2007 (http://www.usnews.com/usnews/biztech/best_careers_2007/). The article highlights a variety of factors that are converging to create a strong job market outlook for school psychologists and emphasizes the generally positive working conditions experienced by those working in our field.

One of the many perks to the profession of school psychology is the potential for flexibility in one's work, such as through part-time positions. While numerous occupations do not lend themselves to part-time work, many school districts offer appealing part-time positions to school psychologists. This is not only a good option for families juggling professional work and parenting, but also for doctoral students; retirees; and school psychologists who want to pursue other opportunities, such as private practice, consulting, or college teaching.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Working Part-Time

Part-time positions can give school psychologists the gift of *time*: Time to spend with family, take a long weekend vacation, go to appointments, clean the house, or finish a dissertation. Most part-timers also enjoy the professional benefits of remaining current in the field: After taking a few years off completely, one would likely find it difficult to catch up on all of the changes in education trends, legislation, and paperwork. Moving to part-time status rather than taking time off can allow school psychologists to "keep their foot in the door" at a school district, as they may be able to maintain a continuing contract, seniority, and/or some benefits.

There are, however, potential drawbacks to part-time employment as a school psychologist. Obviously, income is reduced and sometimes this loss of income is compounded by a loss of medical and retirement benefits. One also may still be responsible for providing all of the mental health services for a school. Much time can be spent planning and catching up on paperwork and often the part-time school psychologist feels he or she must stay late or work evenings and weekends to manage the work load. Schools may ask part-timers to come in on their day off for 'just one meeting.' These psychologists may end up working more than part-time for part-time pay.

There may also be a perceived loss of opportunity to develop deeper relationships with colleagues and students. In fact, some colleagues might resent one's part-time employment and feel that someone working fewer hours is less invested in the students and the school.

From the administrator's point of view, part-timers make staffing decisions more difficult. One must take into account the fact that what the employee wants might not match what is available. For example, the school psychologist might want to work every morning, but the Intervention Assistance Team meets every Thursday after school. In another scenarios, the school psychologist may want to work three full days a week, but the school may only need someone two days a week. While the psychologist in the latter scenario might offer a plan for how his or her third day might be used, there may be a lack of funds in the district budget to allow for the three day a week position. Finally, one's administrator might expect that conducting traditional psychoeducational evaluations should be the part-time psychologist's main priority, leaving less time for consultation, counseling groups, and so forth.

Suggestions for Successful Part-Time Employment

In order to establish successful part-time employment, one must have ample support from the employing school district, as well as

a “personal plan” for making the position not just feasible, but rewarding. Following is a list of “tips” for school psychologists interested in part-time work:

1. Plan well in advance. Talk to psychologists in your district or region who have successfully worked part time. If you know ahead of time that you might be interested in part-time work later in your career, explore how receptive a district is to part-time work *before* going to work for them.
2. List all of the potential barriers you foresee in part-time work and brainstorm how they might be overcome. For example, would you be willing to come in on your day off if you could “trade” it for another day?
3. Discuss barriers and concerns openly with the administrators, brainstorm your solutions, and *document* your agreements in writing.
4. If you are already established at a school where there is a potential part-time allotment (e.g., you already work at one school two days a week and in a different building three days a week), it might be easier for an administrator to accept your proposal to “drop” one building and maintain your present level of service to the other.
5. Consider working two or three full days a week rather than five half-days. If you work half-days, you will likely find yourself staying longer than your required time or feeling guilty when you leave. You will also spend more time driving.
6. Contact your state retirement system when planning your schedule. Some may have stipulations that work in your favor. For example, if you have achieved a certain pay level and work a certain number of days per year, you may have a full year of service count toward retirement, instead of just a partial year.
7. Find out whether your benefits package will remain the same or if there will be changes that potentially affect you and your family. For example, one “benefit” that part-timers sacrifice in some districts is seniority. If there are budget cuts, the part-timers are the first to go.
8. Determine whether you will have the option of returning to full-time work in a few years, if you wish.
9. Get as few building assignments as possible. Working in one building will be more manageable than two or more. Another option in some areas is being the school psychologist for a special program (e.g., working exclusively with all of the students with severe emotional disturbances, conducting the district’s preschool evaluations, or being a consultant regarding students with autism).
10. Consider “job sharing” rather than a part-time position. In job sharing, you generally split a full-time position with another psychologist who wants to work part-time. Together you fulfill a full-time position for the district. In some districts where part-timers are the first to lose their jobs when positions are cut, this might lend you a bit more job security.
11. Make sure part-time work is going to be feasible for you financially. If possible, spend up to a year while you are employed full-time living off of your projected part-time salary.

Set and follow limits in terms of how long you will stay at work each day and how much work you will do from home during your time off. Cell phones and email make it easy to be available “all the time,” which can be a good thing or a major drawback!

Whatever work options you choose, remain creative in designing your job plan. Critically evaluate whatever professional choices you make and find what works best for you. The bottom line is that employers are looking for school psychologists they can trust to do excellent work. If you demonstrate that you can provide such excellence, administrators and supervisors will be more likely to listen to your suggestions regarding how you might best serve their schools.