

## **Application for School Psychology Research Collaboration Conference**

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### **Overview of Cobb County School District**

The Cobb County School District is among the largest three school systems in Georgia and the 28th largest in the United States. It is one of the fastest growing districts in Georgia. Cobb County School District currently has a student population of nearly 96,000 which grows an average of 2,700 students per year. The District operates 62 elementary schools, 21 middle schools, 14 high schools, 7 special education centers, and 1 adult education center. Our district is broken into 6 Regions, each being supervised by a different Area Superintendent. The student population of Cobb County is quite diverse. Specifically, whereas some Regions consist of 92% Caucasian, 4% African-American, and 1% Latino students, other Regions consist of 30% Caucasian, 44% African-American, and 21% Latino students. The socioeconomic status of families also varies significantly throughout the School District. For example, the percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch varies from 2% to 60% across the different Regions. The diversity of Cobb County School District is also apparent when one examines the percentage of students who receive English to Speakers of Other Languages Services (ESOL). The percentage of ESOL students in one Region is as high as 13%.

## **Overview of Cobb County Psychological Services**

Cobb County Psychological Services consists of 31 full-time and 8 part-time psychologists. Currently, there are 13 doctoral-level school psychologists (three of whom are licensed). The overall goal of Psychological Services is to provide each school with a full range of psychological services. These services include indirect services such as consultation with teachers in both general and special education programs, consultation with families, liaison with outside agencies and practitioners to ensure continuity of care, service on the pre-referral Student Support Teams, and service on special education eligibility and IEP committees. The Department of Psychological Services also provides direct services to at-risk students and their families through provision of individual and/or group counseling, administration of comprehensive psychological evaluations for the purpose of educational planning, intervention in crisis situations that necessitate emergency response to assist students and staff affected by the situation, and presentation of parent education/training workshops.

Cobb County Psychological Services has applied to be a member of the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC). The general goal of the Cobb County Predoctoral School Psychology Internship is to train predoctoral-level students to function as independent, ethical, and professional psychologists in an environment which is designed to promote leadership skills, encourage the development of a professional identity, and foster competence in the process of delivery of psychological services. An additional goal of our Predoctoral School Psychology Internship is to produce clinically skilled scientists who, whether engaged in scholarship or service, perform all of their duties in a manner consistent with accepted scientific principles and competencies.

## **Current Departmental Research Initiatives**

Currently, Cobb County Psychological Services is involved in a number of research initiatives. A concerted effort has been made to collaborate with our colleagues at local universities (e.g., Georgia State University, University of Georgia). However, we have had the opportunity to participate in multi-site studies with out-of-state facilities as well (e.g., Nemours Children's Clinic). Our current research initiatives are described below. We plan to begin data collection for Project I in Fall, 2002. Project II is in the initial planning/development stage, and we recently submitted the results of Project III to a peer-reviewed journal.

**I. Study of Individualized, Early Reading Instruction in Children of Different Ethnic, Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds**

Collaborator(s): Robin Morris, Ph.D.; Marlyne Israelian, Ph.D.  
Georgia State University  
Department of Psychology  
Atlanta, Georgia

Overview of Project: School systems are experiencing increasing numbers of enrollees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Many of these children are experiencing difficulty in acquiring basic academic skills, especially in the area of reading. The proposed research attempts to determine the nature of dialectic and linguistic differences that impact reading development for limited English proficient (LEP) students. Additionally, researchers will develop and implement empirically derived reading interventions for these children. The central hypothesis of the study is that dialectic and linguistic differences between English and Spanish (sounds of letters and differences in alphabets) lead to accompanying limitations in phonemic awareness (ability to recognize that each letter has a specific sound attached to it) and recognition of orthographic structure (form of letters). This, in turn, may lead to difficulty in learning decoding and early reading skills. Participants will include 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade students (N = approximately 120 children total), their parents, and their teachers.

**II. School-Refusal Behavior: Prevalence, Classification, Assessment, and Treatment Issues**

Collaborator: Ronald L. Blount, Ph.D.  
University of Georgia  
Department of Psychology  
Athens, Georgia

Overview of Project: School refusal is a significant problem faced by school personnel. Approximately 5% of school-aged students are reported to engage in school refusal behavior (Granell de Aldez, Vivas, Gelfand, & Feldman, 1984). Students engaging in school refusal behavior (SRB) are at risk for experiencing a number of difficulties including marital and work related distress, depression, anxiety, alcoholism, and antisocial behavior (Hibbett & Fogelman, 1989). In recent years, there has been a significant advancement in the knowledge regarding SRB. However, the degree to which school personnel are aware of and utilize such information is questionable due to the gap that is said to exist between research and practice in the area of child psychopathology (Kazdin, Spiegel, & Bass, 1990). Therefore, the overall goal of this study is to gather information regarding the students who receive homebound educational services due to SRB. Specifically, this study will be designed to assess the prevalence of SRB in our county, the characteristics of the students who exhibit SRB, and the response of school officials to the SRB. Not only will we attempt to identify the diagnostic classification of each of these students (e.g., separation anxiety disorder,

specific phobia, social phobia, depression, etc.), but also the functional classification of these students. In other words, we aim to determine the classification of the SRB according to the maintaining consequences or functions of the behavior (e.g., avoidance of fear/anxiety provoking situations, attention seeking, attainment of tangible reinforcers, etc.). The development of treatment approaches appropriate for the different functions of the SRB will also be determined.

### III. Teacher Perceptions of Children with Cancer

Collaborator(s): Ronald L. Blount, Ph.D.  
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Department of Psychology  
Athens, Georgia

Beth Fischer, Ph.D.  
Children's Hospital of Wisconsin  
Department of Psychiatry  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Peggy Greco, Ph.D.  
Nemours Children's Clinic  
Department of Behavioral Pediatrics  
Jacksonville, Florida

Overview of Project: The school reentry process for children with cancer has become an area of increasing interest for psychological research. School reentry exposes children with cancer to adults and peers whose perceptions have the power to affect their development and quality of life. There have been a few suggestions in the literature that teachers may experience some anxiety regarding children with cancer in the classroom (Chekryn, Deegan, & Reid, 1987), or may treat them differently due to their diagnosis (Rynard, Chambers, Klinck, & Gray, 1998). Unfortunately, however, there is little systematic study of teacher perceptions of oncology patients in the classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine teachers' self-reported levels of comfort and confidence in teaching and interacting in the classroom and school setting with children who have cancer, as well as teachers' perceptions of these children in the school setting. Subjects were 136 teachers (3 males, 133 females). The results indicated that past classroom experience with a student with cancer was related to increased teacher comfort, but not confidence in meeting the educational and other needs of these children. Having had personal, but not professional, experience being around a child with cancer was associated with more positive perceptions. Additionally, those teachers who had received formal education in chronic health problems reported higher levels of both comfort and confidence in interacting with and teaching children who have cancer.

### **Interest in the SPRCC & Departmental Vision of Multi-Site Research**

Our staff is quite diverse, and therefore, our research interests are diverse as well. Obviously as can be seen by our current research initiatives, we have several staff members who are interested in the neuropsychological aspects of reading disabilities, school adjustment of children with chronic health conditions, and school-refusal behavior. Other areas of research that are of interest to our department include the development and evaluation of school-wide behavior management programs/models, contextual factors that impact students' and staff's perceptions of school climate, student retention, assessment and treatment of reading disabilities, cultural acclimation of language minority students, and school reentry of students with traumatic/acquired brain injury.

Given the fact that our department is housed in a large county, we have the ability to conduct school-based research with students from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds. Also, since we are located in a large metropolitan area, we have the opportunity to collaborate with our colleagues in academic settings. However, we strongly feel that in order to ensure the continuation and expansion of our research program, we need to establish additional relationships with other counties as well as secure funding from external granting agencies. Also, given our strong commitment to the APA scientist-practitioner model of training, it is critical that our department maintain an active research program. Therefore, we would like to have the opportunity to participate in the School Psychology Research Collaboration Conference. This conference would afford us the chance to meet with other researchers/school systems interested in collaborating on multi-site projects, learn about issues relevant to the conduct of school-based research (e.g., qualitative research methodology), and develop relationships with funding agencies and foundations.

## References

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## Ongoing & Proposed Research Projects

In addition to the projects included in our original applications materials, we are attempting to complete the following projects:

### Evaluation of the Stop & Think Social Skills, Discipline/Behavior Management Program

**The Stop & Think Social Skills, Discipline/Behavior Management Program** is a component of Project ACHIEVE, an Evidence-Based National Model Prevention Program as designated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). **The Stop & Think Program** is a comprehensive school-wide discipline, behavior management, and social skills program. This program teaches interpersonal, self-management, and conflict resolution skills using a behavioral/social learning approach and a universal language and set of steps to facilitate students' learning of prosocial skills and behaviors. **Stop & Think** has been implemented in over 1500 schools or districts across the country in the past 12 years. This program has consistently demonstrated its ability to decrease student discipline referrals to school administrators, school suspensions, and special education referrals and placements; improve positive school climate and students' prosocial interactions; and increase students' ability to stay on task and improve their academic performance.

Seven Cobb County Elementary Schools are in various stages of implementing this program school-wide. We are in the process of evaluating the benefits of the program through collection of outcome data related to student discipline referrals to school administrators, school suspensions, special education referrals and placements, dimensions of school climate, students' prosocial interactions, and students' academic performance.

### Assessment of Psychopathy in Children

Psychopathy has traditionally been defined as a syndrome that involves both antisocial behavior and interpersonal, affective traits (Cleckley, 1982). Research has consistently demonstrated that the antisocial behavior component of psychopathy has separate, distinct correlates from the interpersonal, affective component (Hare, Hart, & Harpur, 1991). One area that has only recently received attention is the concept of psychopathy in children. In children, severe antisocial behavior constitutes either a conduct disorder or an oppositional defiant disorder. Like their adult counterparts, however, conduct-disordered children can be reliably categorized into those high in psychopathy versus those low in psychopathy. Furthermore, psychopathic conduct-disordered children exhibit a greater variety, severity, and chronicity of conduct problems than their non-psychopathic conduct-disordered counterparts (Christian, Frick, Hill, Tyler, & Frazer, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between psychopathy, psychological disorders, and thinking patterns in school-age children. We hypothesize that

children high in psychopathic tendencies will exhibit lower levels of depression and anxiety, and different patterns of cognitive styles than children low in psychopathic tendencies. Participants will be approximately 300 children between the ages of 9 and 14 (half will be recruited from schools and the other half will be recruited from a residential treatment facility or psychiatric inpatient unit for children). Measures to be used include the Children's Depression Inventory, Psychopathy Screening Device, Probabilistic Thinking Questionnaire – Revised, Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale, and Child Behavior Checklist - Teacher Report Form.