

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** January 10, 2001  
Contact: Kathy Cowan, 301-657-0270, ext. 226

## **NASP Applauds Surgeon General's Focus on Children's Mental Health, Calls for Cohesive Community-School System of Care**

**Bethesda, MD**—"Ignoring the mental health needs of America's children is an unacceptable breach in our fundamental responsibility to safeguard their welfare," said Scott Poland, President of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). "The Surgeon General's report is a resounding wake-up call to all of us to address a growing health crisis that causes millions of children and their families to suffer needlessly." The report, "*A National Action Agenda for Children's Mental Health*," offers a blueprint to elevate the nation's treatment of children's mental health to a level on par with our system for their physical health care.

Mental health affects all aspects of a child's life, including their academic, social, and emotional development. The report urges moving toward a cohesive system of care that integrates community, school, medical, and family resources. Based on a public health model, this system would balance health promotion, disease prevention, early detection, and universal access to care. "The goal is to ensure that every child gets mental health screening at an early age and that they have access to consistent assessment and intervention and prevention services throughout their entire childhood," said Poland. "Clearly, schools must play an important role in this process."

Children spend a high percentage of their time in school. Teachers and other school professionals have a tremendous opportunity to identify potential problems and help implement effective intervention strategies. School psychologists facilitate school's ability to perform this role. They provide mental health services in schools that address many of the objectives laid out in the Action Plan. These include assessment; consultation with parents, students, and teachers; implementation of prevention and intervention strategies; coordination of community and school resources; and education on mental health issues.

The report calls upon schools to create proactive systems of behavior support that include individual and universal measures. School psychologists are trained to provide these systems of behavior support for all students and provide selective supports for individuals who have more intensive, long-term needs. NASP and its members help to promote "best practices" to identify and assess potential risks and then implement appropriate research-based strategies.

De-stigmatize mental illness is critical, according to Poland. Parents and children need to be able recognize signs of mental illness and feel comfortable seeking care.

-MORE-

It is important to recognize how an effective system of care for children's mental health supports reform objectives in education, youth violence, juvenile justice, and even workforce development. Related policies should be consistent across legislative initiatives on these issues. "The potential benefits to society are tremendous," says Poland. "We have plenty of evidence that prevention and early intervention for children improves the prospect that they will grow to become healthy, productive adults.

"There are some important messages in this report that resonate with school psychologists and others who work with kids every day," observes Poland. "First, the situation is not hopeless; we can make a difference. While you cannot predetermine a future offender based on early childhood behaviors or problems, you can identify types of risk within a population and work to minimize their influence. Second, we must create a cohesive community-school culture in which violent behavior—even at the lowest levels of teasing and bullying—is unacceptable and commitment to healthy relationships with family, teachers, and peers is the norm."

Schools must play a significant role to help implement these strategies, according to Poland. "The school experience has a huge impact on children's social and emotional development. School professionals typically have the most extended and intensive interaction with children other than parents. It is our responsibility to provide an environment that is positive, observant, and responsive to students' needs before they lead to unhealthy behaviors."

###

*NASP represents 24,000 school psychologists throughout the United States and abroad. NASP's mission is to represent and support school psychology through leadership to enhance the mental health and educational competence of all children. For further information visit [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org).*