

# Rules for School Psychology

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In this paper I will share with you my personal “Rules for School Psychology,” which are the product of almost 20 years of school psychology practice and over a decade of experiences training new school psychologists. These are nothing new or earth shaking, but as you begin your school psychology graduate education, I thought it important to share my “rules for school psychology” with you.

## **Rule 1. Focus on student needs.**

- *Student needs dictate my recommended interventions, not what is desired by adults.*

Especially as a young 25-year-old school psychologist, I think I may not have had this rule clearly in mind. As a result, at times I found myself challenged when trying to wade through the sometimes divergent views of parents and my fellow educators. This remained the case until it became clear to me that while relevant, the needs of adults (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators) were never the bottom line. If I wanted to sleep soundly at night I needed to ensure that my recommendations were student centered. It was one thing to have adults mad at me because of my recommendations, but it was entirely something different if, in an effort to pacify an angry parent or educator, I made a recommendation that I did not feel was primarily focused on the student’s needs. That caused me to lose sleep at night. With attention to this rule, an angry administrator, parent, or teacher (while still not pleasant) did not.

## **Rule 2. There is no such thing as bad data.**

- *However, I can make bad data interpretations.*

From time to time my fellow school psychology colleagues, and now my graduate students, have come to me and said something to the effect of: “This data is a mess, it’s bad.” We all know what the psychologist means when he or she utters these words. Typically, they are referring to the fact that an obtained test score is judged to be an invalid estimate of a student’s true skills or abilities (or the construct the assessment tool purports to measure). However, over time, as I reflected on my own cases wherein I obtained scores judged to be poor estimates, I realized that they nevertheless had interpretive value. It was not my “score” that was potentially flawed rather it was my interpretation of that statistic that could be labeled “bad.” For example, consider the achievement test scores generated by the student who had very poor motivation, was extremely impulsive, and/or inattentive. While likely not a reflection of the construct the test purports to measure (i.e., academic skill level), such results told me a lot about the effect of the observed behavior on academic functioning. To the extent observed test taking behaviors are displayed in other learning environments (which they typically are) they tell me a lot about how, and to what degree, they affect student performance.

## **Rule 3. Look for information that guides interventions.**

- *Truly meaningful data about a student provides me with guidance that leads to student success.*

The most valuable assessment data provides me with information that generates meaningful intervention guidance. “Interesting” data is not necessarily “meaningful” data. Just because a given test score, observation, or other assessment finding is judged to be significantly different from the population the student is being compared to, does not mean it should direct my action. I

need to always ask “so what?” when evaluating the relative importance of any given assessment finding.

**Rule 4. Be prepared to ask difficult questions and deliver bad news.**

- *This will make me uncomfortable.*

From time to time I have had to deliver bad news (e.g., “Your child has an intellectual disability”), and ask challenging questions (e.g., is there a family history of mental illness). This will never get easy for me, nor should it. Consequently, over the course of my career I needed to learn to cope with my own feelings when it came to delivering bad news and asking difficult questions. Just because it is difficult for me to ask a teacher hard questions (e.g., “have you implemented the IEP”) or to deliver challenging news to a parent (e.g., “your child is having thoughts of suicide”), does not excuse me from my responsibility to do so. I have learned to recognize that asking difficult questions and delivering bad news is an important means to the end of success at school (although it still does and always will make me feel uncomfortable).

**Rule 5. Everything is data.**

- *There are many ways through which I can understand a student and develop my psychoeducational recommendations.*

Assessment is much more than simply administering tests. To reinforce this fact Dr. Brian P. Leung (of Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles) offers his school psychology graduate students the “RIOT” acronym, which stands for records, interviews, observations, and testing to help define assessment. However, despite such explicit instruction, for the new school psychology student, who quite literally spends hundreds of hours learning to use psychological tests and measures, there is an understandable tendency to place too much stock in obtained test scores. After all anything that takes so much time learning how to do must be incredibly important. Correct? And while, in fact, the ability to administer, score, and interpret psychological tests is part of what makes the school psychologist special, it is essential that I not view them as the only data source. In fact, there will be instances wherein the obtained test scores are not the most important result. For example, behavior while taking a psychological test often tells me just as much, if not more, about the student than any test score. I need to always keep in mind that everything I collect as I review records, observe students, interview the student and his/her significant others, and administer psychoeducational tests is a potentially powerful data source and consequently should not be ignored or overlooked. Testing is a part of the assessment process; it is not all there is to assessment.

**Rule 6. Statistics do not dictate actions.**

- *Tests don't make psycho-educational recommendations, I do!*

Rule 5 directs me to recognize that “everything is data.” And complementing that rule, I also argue that that the results, numbers, or statistics, obtained from any assessment measure are in and of themselves meaningless. It is my interpretation of these data that is informative. Without a competent psychologist to make interpretations, the results of any assessment are not just meaningless they are dangerous. For example, in the case of an ID evaluation, just because an obtained score falls two standard deviations below the mean does not automatically identify a student as a person with an intellectual disability. Similarly, just because an obtained IQ score is above 70 does not necessarily rule out this eligibility determination. Factors such as the measures’ standard error of measure, the nature of the standardization sample and, in the case of

an IQ test, the Flynn Effect are among the factors that need to be considered when determining if the student is functioning two or more standard deviations below the current population mean.

**Rule 7. Never draw a conclusion from a single data source.**

- *I need to look for multiple sources of agreement before coming to any conclusion.*

Most psychoeducational data sources, in and of themselves, do not allow me to generate answers or definitive conclusions. As was suggested in Rule 5, the data I typically use (as I strive to understand a student) are the subject of interpretation. Consequently, I find it essential to never come to a conclusion from any single data source. I recognize the multiple sources of error that can influence any single result and thus look to triangulate different data sources before coming to psychoeducational conclusions.

**Rule 8. There is no such thing as an “un-testable” student.**

- *There are students for whom my standardized tests are psychometrically invalid.*

Consistent with Rule 2, which asserts that there is no such thing as bad data, my experience has also found that there is no such thing as an “un-testable” student. While there may be instances wherein the statistics or numbers generated by a series of psychoeducational tests do not reflect the constructs the tests purport to measure, this is very different from concluding a student is un-testable. Remember rule #5? Everything is data. Even the psychoeducational assessment finding that is judged to not be “valid” still generates interpretable data. Because there are so many ways (including but not limited to traditional psychoeducational measures) to understand a student, when you get right down to it there is no such thing as an un-testable student.

**Rule 9. Earn the privilege of sharing an “expert” opinion.**

- *Just because I am a “school psychologist” doesn’t mean I will always be listened to.*

The title “school psychologist” gives me some initial credibility with many (but not all) consumers of my services. Consequently, it is important for me to be deliberate about earning the privilege of having my psychoeducational recommendations at least considered and hopefully followed. This often times does not occur right away, and I have found that one of the most effective ways to earn this privilege is listening (and I mean truly listening) to the parents and teachers who are the typical consumers of my recommendations. I have found that when these individuals feel that I have understood what they are telling me, they are much more likely to consider and follow my recommendations.

**Rule 10. Strive to give away psychology.**

- *My psycho-educational strategies are not covert and should be understood by all.*

Psycho-educational strategies are not covert. My goal is to help teachers, administrators, parents, and students themselves understand learning, learning processes, and how to best ensure student success. Consequently, I view all psychoeducational consultations as teaching opportunities. The more administrators, teachers, and parents I can help to understand the methods behind my recommendations, the greater will be my reach. For when I am successful in giving away school psychology the consumers of my services will increasingly be able to independently meet the learning needs of students, which in turn frees me to work with others.

**Rule 11. Be attentive to what students do well.**

- *I need to assertively identify student strengths and use this information to guide my recommended interventions.*

I strive to avoid simply telling parents and teachers what a student cannot do. Rather I use psychoeducational data to assertively identify strengths and use such information to guide interventions. Each and every student, no matter how severe their learning challenges, has his or her islands of strength. I need to find and use them.

**Rule 12. Always tell students what to do.**

- *I need to avoid simply telling students what not to do.*

Consistent with the strength based approach suggested by Rule 11, I also strive to always tell students themselves what it is that I want them to do and avoid simply telling them what they should stop doing. What is the student doing right? What is the student doing well? Each and every student has something that we can celebrate and that will help guide him or her toward greater success at school.

**Rule 13. Ask good questions and be a life-long learner.**

- *I should never think I have all the answers*

Arguably, school psychologists are among the best-informed class of educators working in the schools. It is my opinion, and granted I may be a bit biased, that the school psychology credential is the most demanding one to earn. That said I always strive to be humble, and never assume that I know it all. There will always be that next new advance that I need to attend to. And if I listen to each and every one of my colleagues (not to mention the parents and students I serve) they can teach me valuable lessons. But such learning will take place if, and only if, I recognize the importance of life-long learning and the fact I will never have all of the answers.

**Rule 14. Be a critical consumer of psycho-educational tools and interventions.**

- *I strive to use empirically supported tools/interventions, but at the same time remain open to new approaches.*

And finally, while it is important to be attentive to the empirical literature and make use of tools and interventions with documented efficacy, I strive to always be open to the next new discovery. It is important to be a critical consumer of psychoeducational interventions, but I recognize the possibility that today's unproved theory can be (with the appropriate study) tomorrows empirically supported best practice. For example, dyslexia was poorly understood when I was originally trained, yet because of my attention to the literature I was able to give rapid naming and phoneme deletion tasks long before today's well standardized measures of phonological processing were available.

Well that's it. You now know the 14 rules that guide my school psychology practice. I suspect that many of my rules will be consistent with principles that will guide your practice. But I am also sure that there will be other rules that will become important to your school psychology practice, and during our time together, I hope I will have the opportunity to talk with many of you about what you judge to be *your essential rules* of school psychology.