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Tribute to Dr. R. Brett Nelson

Written by Shane R. Jimerson, Ph.D., NCSP.

It is with great sadness that I share that our colleague and dear friend - Dr. R. Brett Nelson - unexpectedly died this week. I know there are many colleagues who will be saddened by this news, as Dr. Nelson has long been an active member of many professional associations, including NASP, CASP, CSSP, APA-D16, and ISPA. I send sincere condolences to his family members, students, colleagues, and friends. In the spirit of celebrating his life and some of his many contributions to the field of school psychology, below is a bit of information about Dr. Nelson.

Dr. Nelson earned a BA at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. He then pursued a Masters degree in the graduate school psychology program at the University of Georgia in 1978 and became a practicing school psychologist in 1980, in Greeley, Colorado. Then, while working as a school psychologist, he completed a PhD (1992) in School and Educational Psychology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado. He worked as a school psychologist and taught at the University of Northern Colorado for a decade, and then in 2008 he joined the faculty full-time at the California State University – San Bernardino, which he continued as a full-professor until his passing this week. Throughout his active engagement as a full-time school psychologist, then part-time in both practice and teaching, and then most recently in his full-time capacity as a professor Dr. Nelson has engaged in contributing innovations in practice that are exceptional contributions to the field of school psychology. Most recently, Dr. Nelson was the recipient of the 2022 APA-Division 16 School Psychology Contributions to Practice Award [apadivision16.org].

Emphasis on Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services

Throughout his career, Dr. Nelson helped to conceptualize, implement, supervise and research an integrated comprehensive service model of school psychological services. An exemplar of this was his work in schools in Greeley Colorado. His efforts have consistently emphasized the importance of collaboration among school psychologists, administration, teachers, and university personnel. A description of his early work in this area is described in a paper at NASP in 1992 (Nelson and Blank, 1992). The model placed a full-time school psychologist in each school to be the primary mental-health provider in the system. Nelson and Blank (1993) presented evaluative data on the implementation and effectiveness at the next NASP convention. During the next decade, Dr. Nelson and colleagues presented their findings on the Integrated School Services Model at APA, and NASP, as well as Colorado and regional meetings. The findings featured in their numerous papers and publications indicated many positive outcomes, including;

a) positive perceptions as measured over time by all constituents; b) time-on-task surveys indicated significant increases (more than double) of time spent on interventions; c) reductions in the number of ED students over 12 years with a 34% enrollment increase; d) increased psychological report recommendations in IEP goals; e) improved school discipline in measured schools; and f) a variety of SEL supports with whole-school prevention programs, and mentoring programs.

It is particularly notable that in the early 1990's, an APA/NASP joint committee identified seven locations for outstanding psychological services, which included Dr. Nelson's work in Greeley Public Schools, CO. Dr. Nelson also provided extensive consultation regarding the Integrated School Services Model in school districts, in an APA accredited doctoral consortium, and demonstrated positive support for appropriate inclusion practices; and more consistent use of and improved functioning of school problem solving teams.

Notably, Dr. Nelson's early pioneering work in these areas continued across the years and is reflected in some of his most recent publications focused on further advancing school psychology practice. For instance, one of his recent publications focused on topics such as: The effects of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports on student academic achievement and The association between student wellness and student engagement at school. His most recent scholarship addresses the particularly important and contemporary topic of Wellness paths to life satisfaction among multicultural youth.

Mentoring of School Psychologists

Throughout Dr. Nelson's career, as a practicing school psychologist, as an adjunct faculty member, and as a full-time faculty member, his top priority was always the mentoring and supervision of future school psychologists. His mentoring efforts over four decades focused on emphasizing evidence-based practices to support the development of children at school. Dr. Nelson consistently remained abreast of contemporary scholarship and features this research in his work to supervise, mentor, and prepare the next generation of school psychologists. Both in the school settings and teaching courses at the university, Dr. Nelson consistently highlighted the importance of contemporary research informing the activities of school psychologists. His many successes and contributions over the years are reflected in the many school psychologists whom he provided mentoring and supervision to prepare for their careers.

Scholarship Advancing School Psychology Practice

Dr. Nelson was also actively engaged in scholarship that advances school psychology practice. Throughout his career, as a practicing school psychologist, adjunct faculty, and as a full-time faculty member, Dr. Nelson continuously engaged in research and scholarly activities focused squarely on advancing school psychology practice. Throughout his collaborative scholarship with EdS students at CSU-SB, he continued to stress the critical value of data collection and research. An example of his success in research mentoring and collaboration is that in 2014 two of the students working with him won the California Association of School Psychologists Michael Goodman Memorial Research Award. This project employed a full behavior analysis and multimodal intervention approach to successfully address student academic and behavioral challenges. Dr. Nelson had over 40 publications across his career, and

more than 100 presentations. I had an opportunity to attend many of his presentations over the years and also had many opportunities to collaborate with Dr. Nelson on multiple projects. Across all activities, Dr. Nelson was actively engaged with students, practitioners, and colleagues to contribute his vast experiences, knowledge, and insights. Notably, Dr. Nelson frequently presented his scholarship at State, National, and also international conferences. Among our international colleagues, Dr. Nelson was a highly esteemed and frequent contributor to the proceedings of the International School Psychology Association annual conference. The combination of practical experience, methodological rigor, and practical application that Dr. Nelson brought to his scholarship, presentations, and publications is consistently well-received across many diverse audiences of school psychologists and allied professionals throughout the country and around the world. As many colleagues can appreciate, maintaining active and ongoing scholarly endeavors is not simple within the context of an institution wherein the teaching loads are high, the mentoring loads are high, and there is minimal support for scholarly endeavors, thus, it is to Dr. Nelson's credit that he maintained such a high level of scholarly engagement, amidst his many other faculty responsibilities.

Robust Practice, Mentoring, Teaching, and Scholarly Contributions

Some colleagues excel in their work with children, families, and administrators in the schools each day. Some colleagues excel in mentoring other school psychologists to be successful in their future work to support children, families, and schools. Some colleagues excel in their scholarship and make important contributions to practice through these efforts. Dr. Nelson is among the exceptionally few colleagues who excelled in each of these contexts throughout his career, truly making exceptional contributions to the field of school psychology through innovations in practice. With more than 40 years of practice, supervision, mentoring, research, and teaching, Dr. Nelson exemplified the characteristics and contributions that are celebrated in the APA Division 16 Contributions to Practice Award. On a personal note, Dr. Nelson enjoyed time and travels with his family and friends, including numerous camping trips in California, international trips, and many wonderful adventures at his cabin in Sugarloaf / Big Bear, California (skiing, cross country, snowshoeing, and boating on Big Bear Lake in the summer). Dr. Nelson's numerous contributions and the impact of his work on the lives of children and families, as well as the careers of so many professionals, the influence on so many school systems, and the contributions of his scholarship to advancing the field of school psychology were recognized with special recognition. His many contributions will continue to inform and positively impact children, families, professionals, and schools across the state, country, and around the world, ... as a colleague, leader, collaborator, and friend, Dr. Nelson will be missed.

Sincerely,

Shane