

How Is School Psychology Doing: Why Hasn't School Psychology Realized Its Promise?

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We take a look back to 1995 when Conoley and Gutkin shared their vision for an adult-focused practice of school psychology with a primary focus on developing health-promoting systems for school-age children. We then look to the present to what has happened and not happened to substantiate their vision. We found very encouraging developments and continuing challenges in the research targets and practice roles of school psychologists. There is no shortage of evidence-based strategies to improve the school experience of all children. The opportunities offered by, for example, the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support paradigm are promising, but it is unclear whether school psychologists are assuming leadership roles in this work. Furthermore, incorporating postdoctoral specialties is a promising role expansion for school psychologists, but most of the specialties keep the psychologists' focus on individual child assessment and treatment. School psychology is a very large professional tent with room for many approaches to preventing childhood disorders and promoting behavioral and academic success. Graduate education and current practice seem to reflect the traditional test and place roles for psychologists that Conoley and Gutkin hoped to expand beyond 25 years ago. Research efforts and national organization supports are hopeful, however, for a reimagined practice of psychology that makes use of the powerful ecosystems that affect children's well-being. Much work is yet to be done.

Impact and Implications


The authors offer a critical analysis of the extent to which the profession of school psychology has influenced schools and schooling in systematic and structural ways. They argue that the promise of school psychology is to prevent children's learning and behavioral health issues by organizing systems of care among all the adults connected with the children. Readers may find descriptions of current directions in the field as exciting opportunities to expand their professional roles or research targets.

Keywords: consultation, prevention, systems interventions, population-based approaches

Years ago, Conoley and Gutkin (1995) wrote an article detailing the concern that school psychology would not reach its promise as a profession committed to children's well-being without some serious changes in graduate education, targets of research and practice, expanded influence at state and local levels on role descriptions for school psychologists, and a better professional communication/change system. These extended arguments made earlier (Conoley & Gutkin, 1986a, 1986b) suggest that to increase K-12 students' behavioral health and academic success, school psychologists would have to refocus their work to adults in school systems and toward students' families. Their assertions were based

on decades-old research (Albee, 1968) indicating that direct, individual psychological services would never meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of our nation's millions of schoolchildren. First, there would never be that many school psychologists available (Sarason, 1982), and waiting to offer direct service to children after they have developed difficulties is not efficient and often not effective. Their argument was for school psychology to adopt a public health model, that is, one based on population health with a strong focus on preventive and targeted interventions tailored to the needs of all students. Essentially this means not waiting for referrals for services but designing schoolwide interventions known to promote well-being for all children and interventions shown to reduce the risk of academic failure and behavioral disorders. These interventions would necessarily depend on all the adults in a system being focused on creating optimal environments for behavioral health and academic success.

These schoolwide interventions are analogous to vaccinations, hand washing, fluoridation, wearing seatbelts, being smoke and tobacco free, covering mouths and noses, and draining standing water to prevent germ- or insect-borne diseases (Price, Cowen,

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Lorion, & Ramos-McKay, 1988; Ward & Warren, 2006). Possible examples related to social, emotional, and academic thriving include schoolwide positive behavioral supports, focus on student strengths and growth mindset, highly skilled and personalized instructional practices, involvement of parents in supporting learning, and adult interpersonal styles that model and promote respect for all. Of course, to accomplish such ambitious programming school psychology graduate students must be well prepared with knowledge and skills about facilitating system change. In 1995, most doctoral and specialist school psychology programs emphasized individual cognitive and emotional assessment as the signature skills of school psychologists (Brown & Minke, 1986; Kramer, Conoley, Bischoff, & Benes, 1991). Furthermore, most professional internship placements reinforced a role that was primarily assessment, report writing and limited behavioral consultation. Not surprisingly, multiple reports about how school psychologists spend their time reflected exactly that role breakdown (Bramlett, Murphy, Johnson, Wallingsford, & Hall, 2002). Although staunchly recommending consultation as an important form of indirect service, implementation and effectiveness problems were apparent (Witt, 1990). Most field-based consultative efforts suffered from significant treatment integrity issues. Teachers and parents often failed to implement the behavioral plans so painstakingly developed during the collaborative consultative process. Because of this, Conoley et al. (1995) argued for more implementation research to investigate components of an adult-focused model that actually empowered and motivated consultees to follow through with classroom or home-based interventions with high fidelity. A focus on implementation research reflected the long-held description of school psychology as a scientist-practitioner specialty (Bardon, 1983), but Conoley and Gutkin argued that the historic targets of school psychology research were holding the field back. Instead of research about psychometric qualities of new assessments, they urged that school psychology science be about systems change and about how to encourage and enable educators and parents to carry out jointly conceived interventions aimed at increasing students' academic and behavioral success. Instead of a primary research focus on individual or small group therapy or social skills training, they urged psychologists to create school and district-wide approaches to increase adult motivation, skills, and resilience to be involved in creating health-promoting environments for children.

Because school psychologists and their roles exist in the highly regulated environments of public schools and are not just the products of university research and training goals, effective models for school psychology must be supported by local policies and state regulations. Policymakers are unlikely to be reading the latest research literature and may require the in-person and persistent influence of expert psychologists at the policy-making table. Examples of enlightened models of school-based practice were rare in the 1990s, but they did exist (Dwyer & Bernstein, 1998; Ikeda, Tilly, Stumme, Volmer, & Allison, 1996). In these cases of effective practice, a common element was the strong influence of school psychologists collaborating with state policymakers in setting expectation for psychological practice in the schools (Reschly, 1988). Conoley et al.'s (1995) plea for significant changes in training, practice, research, and public engagement was disseminated via a journal article. They were then, and we are today, self-consciously aware that journal articles are unlikely drivers of

change. In the same way, writing psychological reports is not predictably linked to child change; writing journal articles about school psychology roles was and is an unlikely impetus to professional paradigm transformations. Conoley and Gutkin identified implementation (action) research on models of service delivery that actually resulted in evidence-based improvement in learning and behavior as the gold standard for school psychology researchers and as possible triggers for change (Forman et al., 2013).

Since 1995: Some Promising Trends

Has school psychology changed? We, and others who have written about school psychology history and roles since 1995 see reasons for optimism and for caution (Bramlett et al., 2002; D'Amato, Zafiris, McConnell, & Dean, 2011; Graves, Proctor, & Aston, 2014; Gutkin, 2012; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000; Shriberg, Song, Miranda, & Radliff, 2013). On the optimistic side, our national organizations promote broad roles for school psychologists through the APA (2012) School Psychology Specialty Guidelines (<https://www.apa.org/ed/graduate/specialize/school.aspx>, which are currently being updated and revised) and through various publications from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2020b). Both organizations describe roles that include assessment, preventive services, clinical interventions, systems change programs, program evaluation, and research with populations that include students, educators, and families. In addition, multiple national organizations have sponsored School Psychology Futures Conferences in 2002 and 2012 (e.g., www.indiana.edu/~futures) that called for numerous changes in the field (Sheridan & D'Amato, 2003). In particular, Sheridan et al. cited 14 recommendations (pp. 352–354) that would certainly have been welcomed by Conoley et al. (1995). The recommendations can be summarized in a list of words and phrases: prevention and intervention, collaboration, cultural sensitivity, adult focused, all children, and proactive and program evaluation. Sheridan et al., although seeing the recommendations as beneficial, express, as we do, some concern about the field's commitment to a paradigm change in practice.

On the other hand, there has been an increasing number of research reports that deal explicitly with interventions with adults who interact with schoolchildren. Of some special note is a description of how adding supports from consultants (e.g., role play, modeling, performance feedback) increased teachers' use of plans generated through behavioral consultation (Collier-Meek, Sanetti, Levin, Kratochwill, & Boyle, 2019; Noell, Volz, Henderson, & Williams, 2017). Rather than the singular focus on creating the best intervention plan, these researchers included strategies to make it more likely that treatment fidelity would be achieved by the adults with the most contact with children. Additional research has also demonstrated the added benefits of coaching and consultation to traditional professional development (PD). Bradshaw and colleagues (2018) found that teachers' beliefs about their own culturally responsive behavior management skills improved following five professional development sessions aimed at reducing overrepresentation of African-American students in disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and special education referrals. However, the teachers who received coaching in addition to the PD were more likely to change their behaviors; they became more proactive and responsive to students' needs and issued fewer office disciplinary referrals for African-American students, compared with the teachers who received only the PD. These findings reflect both the

importance of adult-focused interventions and a vital research topic on interrupting the impact of systemic racism on teacher behavior and child outcomes. Importantly, Cook et al. (2018) also examined ways to change teachers' behaviors by helping teachers to improve their own self-regulation to avoid snap decisions that are vulnerable to implicit bias especially aimed at students of color. Their GREET-STOP-PROMPT (GSP) program emphasizes creating and maintaining positive and authentic relationship with students as well as proactive classroom management strategies. Program delivery was developed with key school personnel and consisted of two professional development sessions, weekly coaching using fidelity checklists, performance feedback, and problem-solving discussions about GSP implementation within preexisting professional learning communities.

They found GSP reduced office disciplinary referrals by two thirds for African-American students. This study also highlights the multiple methods consultants can use to help teachers become better at meeting all their students' needs. Together these studies present concrete ways to address the long-standing travesty of African American students being prone to more subjective and harsher exclusionary discipline practices compared with White students. This work illustrates that the key is changing the teacher, not the student. This adult-focused work is exactly what Conoley and Gutkin envisioned in 1995 and reflects a growing awareness that student diversity must be a variable in school psychology research and practice.

Other hopeful signs include research showing systems' effects on moderating children's success. For example, work by O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, and Eklund (2014) examined how the quality of a school's climate moderated the effects of family structure on student's grades. Their findings showed that positive school climates could moderate the negative effects of one-parent families on academic grades. Another example of support for systemic/ecological approaches came from Castro-Olivo et al. (2013) who focused on resiliency and violence reduction. They were able to show that violence reduction programs based on ecological perspectives were more effective with target children in reducing acting out behaviors than programs designed to affect narrow internal personal attributes, such as self-efficacy. Sheridan's work on conjoint behavioral consultation (Sheridan, 2019) showed that by involving parents and teachers in a highly structured and evaluated process, children's well-being and academic performance could be enhanced. Her work, thus, has supported a system-spanning approach focused specifically on building teacher and parental skills in meeting a variety of special needs evidenced by children. Swanger-Gagné, Garbacz, and Sheridan (2009) offered an in-depth analysis of what consultant behaviors were actually needed to promote treatment integrity in homes, especially homes stressed by poverty. Consultant strategies included frequent contacts and praise for parents to further empower them to use effective parenting practices. This research illustrated how many questions remain, however, about cost effectiveness and dosage of these ecologically based interventions.

There are also reports about multitiered systems of support (MTSS; Eagle, Dowd-Eagle, Snyder, & Holtzman, 2014; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016) that describe a systematic blending of response-to-instruction/intervention (RtI) plus positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). Both these elements are consistent with a public health model as resources are allocated in

proportion to need through universal, targeted and specialized treatment options (McIntosh et al., 2018). Further, data-based decision making and interventions supported by scientifically based research and implemented with fidelity are the foundation of MTSS (Sugai & Horner, 2009). This model has the advantage, from our perspective, of a population-based approach that recognizes the roles played by teachers, school administrators, and families in supporting children's success (Gresham, Jimerson, Burns, & Vanderheyden, 2007). Unfortunately, too often MTSS is misconstrued narrowly as a singular intervention (e.g., "Johnny is getting MTSSed"), or team (e.g., "The MTSS team is meeting to discuss the latest screening data"), or process (e.g., We use MTSS to determine special education eligibility) rather than an integrative system focused on prevention (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

Edwards and Fauth (2018) offered an evaluation of MTSS programs in nine New Hampshire school districts. Districts with high fidelity implementation evidenced reductions in children's discipline referrals with an accompanying increase in instructional time for students and a decrease in administrative (nonteaching) time for school personal. They also reported better attendance and persistence in school and a drop-in substance abuse that mirrored national statistics. Importantly, the high-fidelity districts increased their internal capacity for mental health interventions and also increased the number of children and families they activity referred to community agencies. Involvement of multiple systems to support children's well-being increased the capacity and resilience of the school's service delivery approach. The benefits to practitioners and researchers adopting an ecological or public health approach to improving student outcomes are many, including the development and validation of screening tools for early detection of mental health, reading, math or writing problems. For example, Dowdy et al. (2014) found universal screening allows for continuous development of preventive and targeted interventions so that mental health service delivery is not delayed until a student evidences serious symptoms (Dowdy, Ritchey, & Kamphaus, 2010). The Dowdy, et al. focus on prevention and mental health interventions is what Conoley et al. (1995) has hoped for all those many years ago.

In addition to developing and validating a variety of screening tools, robust measures of implementation fidelity have been another innovation in our field. For example, the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI; McIntosh et al., 2016), when properly employed, can detect whether a systems-change effort, such as implementing PBIS, is actually occurring as well as direct the implementation team to specific processes in need of improvement or refinement. Researchers continue to discover key ingredients to initiating and sustaining systems-change. Implementation science has discovered ways to scale-up and sustain evidence-based practices. Of course, district-level support is critical to both (Klingner, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013). For example, McIntosh et al. (2016) found that having a critical mass of schools implementing PBIS within a district was associated with better implementation fidelity later on. They also found beginning the PBIS implementation with high fidelity was associated with greater sustainability of PBIS three years later, thus, success breeds success.

Over the past decade many high-quality resources have become available to help school psychologists and their colleagues engage in systems-change to promote better outcomes for all students. For example, the *State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-*

based Practices (SISEP) Center has made their District Capacity Assessment available to help school and district personnel develop action plans for implementing system-wide innovation. Part of any action plan will involve professional development and the *IRIS Center* at Vanderbilt University has hundreds of evidence-based modules, activities, case studies and informational briefs that can help school psychologists support school staff to provide better prevention and intervention services. The *CEEDAR Center* also provides course enhancement modules, ways to promote high leverage practices, and webinars. IRIS and CEEDAR are also strong resources for training programs, particularly those interested in a flipped classroom wherein the content is introduced online prior to class and class time is devoted to extending the content through clinical practice or exploring how to modify the practice to meet the ecological demands of a particular setting or student population. The CEEDAR innovation configurations can be used to assist school psychology faculty in analyzing the extent to which evidence-based interventions are being taught in their coursework. One of the most promising trends of the past decade has been the development and application of standards to judge the quality of the research on a particular practice (Kampwirth & Powers, 2016). The Department of Education's *What Works Clearinghouse's* aims to provide educators with the information they need to select evidence-based interventions. The *National Center on Intensive Interventions* also applies high standards to critiquing the level of scientific support for various intervention tools as well as rates the psychometric quality of numerous academic and behavioral screening tools.

Thus, school psychologists no longer need to rely on reading peer reviewed journals to keep abreast of the current research on evidence-based interventions and assessments crucial to positive systems change. The availability of so many more tools, including road maps on how to implement systems change is surely a great improvement but raises the question about the actual involvement school psychologists in these endeavors.

Since 1995: Some Cautions to Optimism

A literature review by Theron (2015) detailed how the social ecologies of everyday life in schools may be used to increase child resilience but noted that school psychologists were not involved in any of the work she was able to uncover. Her opinion was that, despite the potentially powerful impacts of resilience-enhancing environments for child well-being, school psychologists were involved primarily in assessing children, not systems, and were generally unavailable to promote resilience-enhancing educator behaviors. The research she reviewed is exactly what Conoley et al. (1995) were calling for, but her review evidenced no involvement from school psychologists. So what are school psychologists doing if not creating resiliency-enhancing educational environments? Castillo, Curtis, and Gelley (2012) found that most school psychologists devote more of their time to special education eligibility activities, compared with any other type of services. Traditional psychometric testing for eligibility remains a dominant press in the field of school psychology.

The traditional cognitive-achievement discrepancy model has been replaced with the rather recent phenomenon for learning disability assessments based on processing strengths and weaknesses (PSW). PSW proponents assert that cognitive and process-

ing assessment results are a necessary component to a comprehensive assessment as a way to identify subtypes of academic skill deficits and thereby inform subsequent interventions (Christo, D'Incau, & Pozuric, 2017; Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2010). Critics of PSW note a lack of high-quality empirical evidence in support of these assertions (Consortium for Evidence-based Early Intervention Practices, 2010). Specifically, they take issue with the poor technical adequacy of the different PSW methods (Stuebing, Fletcher, Branum-Martin, & Francis, 2012), the failure to empirically demonstrate the positive impact of cognitive testing on academic outcomes (Burns & Petersen-Brown, 2018; Miciak et al., 2016), and the continued search for the aptitude by treatment interactions that have time and again been deemed an illusion rather than clinical acumen (McGill & Busse, 2017).

Furthermore, this pursuit returns psychologists' attention to child-focused rather than adult-focused services, which does not meet the dreams Conoley et al. (1995) had for a primarily indirect service delivery model. Thus, PSW appears to be another way for school psychologists to spend a substantial portion of their time doing individual assessments that do not lead to specific and effective treatments based on the assessments. We do not judge this to be a step forward for school psychology. In addition, literature since 1995 is replete with calls for school psychological specialties focused on individual child treatment. These include specialties in treating students with pediatric or early-onset schizophrenia, depression, suicidal ideation, obesity, chronic illness; atypical neurological functioning; and those who have experienced homelessness and maltreatment (Miller & Maricle, 2019; Perfect & Moore, 2019; Semrud Clikeman, & Griffin, 2000; Shaw, Gomes, Polotskaia, & Jankowska, 2015; Sulkowski, 2016; Viesel & Davis, 2014). Several of these sub- or postdoctoral-specialty definitions mention the importance of consultation, partnerships with external practitioners, and the need for public health approaches (e.g., reduce threat and promote protective factors). For example, Perfect et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of a public health framework in which providing training, supports, and resources to teachers in a systems framework increases learning opportunities and outcomes for students with chronic health conditions. In large measure, however, they all direct the school psychologist's focus toward children's individual difficulties. As such, whereas they offer important direct service opportunities for school psychologists, especially at the doctoral level, they continue to point school psychology research and practice toward specialized services (e.g., neuropsychology, pediatric school psychology, applied behavioral analysis, etc.) rather than systems change. All these areas are vital, but all turn school psychologists' attention away from preventive systems' change (see Power & D'Amato, 2018 for an alternative view). We reiterate that all these areas are valuable additions to the individual practices of psychologists, but where is the postdoctoral education in systems intervention?

The selected literature reviewed above also reflects on a training issue. Are school psychology graduate students being educated to be clinicians with particular subspecialties within schools or as the best-prepared professionals to facilitate system change? How do we best increase the impact of this relatively small corps of highly trained mental health professionals in service of children's well-being (Curtis, Hunley, & Grier, 2004)? Both the optimistic and cautionary trends in school psychology, in our opinion, escalate

required expertise levels of school psychologists. Whereas there are historic disagreements about necessary levels of training (i.e., specialist vs. doctoral), there is no doubt successful implementation of emerging practice models, for example, MTSS and clinical specialties in the schools, cannot be fulfilled without an extensive clinical science background plus commitments to career long learning, at least, about system level consultation and advanced research and program evaluation techniques (Burns et al., 2018).

Currently school psychologist practitioners, with 3 years of graduate training, often have the most extensive training of anyone in the schoolroom. Teachers, who have the most day-to-day contact with students, rarely have equivalent levels of graduate training as school psychologists with specialist or doctoral degrees. School psychologists have the potential to influence teachers, administrators, and other school staff through consultation, professional development, and coaching, if they are given the training to do so, but how many school psychology training programs offer coursework specifically on implementation science and systems change? How does this compare with the amount of study devoted to psychoeducational assessment? If a school psychology student is expected to administer and receive feedback on, say, eight Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-V administrations, are they also expected to have eight separate consultation sessions observed and critiqued by program faculty? In some ways, the typical psychoeducational report is a microcosm for our field in which the results of formal testing are given much more deference than the ecological information contained within the report. Part of the problem may be the demand to have legally defensible reports that clearly diagnose disability and special education eligibility.

However, there is little case law to suggest an intervention-based psychoeducational report that is both informed by and a result of an MTSS is not legally defensible; in fact, hearing officers often rely on the testimony of the school psychologist to determine whether the eligibility process was adequate (Zirkel, 2013). Furthermore, differential diagnosis is not an effective use of time because many students with mild to moderate disabilities share important learning challenges and respond to similar scientifically based treatments (Ysseldyke, Reshly, & VanDerHayden, 2019). The *Larry P v. Riles* decision, an event well known to school psychologists in California, is a historical illustration of the ineffectiveness of testing practices to influence large-scale system inequities. The *Larry P* court case and subsequent task forces resulted in a ban on administering cognitive assessments to African-American students for the purpose of special education eligibility in California. It has, however, had no discernable impact on the problems of disproportionality in special education placements (Powers, Hagans-Murillo, & Restori, 2004).

Systems change requires knowledge and skill about implementation science. When all graduates of school psychology programs know how to conduct a needs assessment to identify groups of students experiencing opportunity gaps, resource map, build an implementation team, set short- and long-term systems goals, engage in data-based decision making, select and monitor evidence-based interventions, effectively consult with teachers, and collaborate with families and local agencies and community groups to capitalize on resources for students, our profession will, in our view, have arrived. In our society we have people who believe vaccines cause autism, global warming is a natural event, and the world is flat. Sadly, in school psychology we have a

persistent engagement in practices that do not improve students' outcomes (VanDerHeyden, 2019).

Is the Practice of School Psychology Changing?

Change may be afoot for school psychology. Many states across the country (e.g., Illinois and Florida) now describe their service delivery model as one that is for all children and based on principles of MTSS. It is critical that the role of service providers in school systems be encoded by state and local policymakers as broad and varied and with an explicit focus on adult change. Barbarasch (2017) describes how the New Jersey Association School Psychologists worked with staff from the Department of Education and the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association to expand the role to the school psychologist to be more focused on prevention and intervention. Historically, school psychologists in New Jersey served primarily on the child study teams, which determine special education eligibility and services. As such, administrators did not consider involving their psychologists in prevention and intervention services. Additionally, faced with heavy caseloads, many New Jersey psychologists were not looking to expand their role either. Yet school psychologists embraced transforming their roles to be more involved in prevention and intervention when the call to do so tapped into their desire to make an impact in schools.

Leigh Kokenes, the 2019 NASP School Psychologist of the Year, was recognized in part because of her work at the state level on North Carolina's Governor's Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education as well as her work as cochair of the North Carolina School Psychology Association's Legislative and Public Policy committee. Such state level partnerships and advocacy are a good thing from our perspectives, and training programs must respond accordingly. Likewise, Chandrai Jackson-Saunders, the 2020 NASP School Psychologist of the Year, was described as implementing systems-level change that included helping to implement social-emotional learning as an academic content area, using data to problem solve and improve student outcomes in an MTSS framework, and advocating for families by reactivating several initiatives including the Principal's Coffee with Parent Hour (NASP, 2020a). Perhaps, trainers and researchers need to learn from these exemplary practitioners how to forge the way to engage in systems change.

Conclusion

There are hopeful signs about school psychology. So much has been accomplished since the early days of Lightner Witmer (D'Amato et al., 2011). More implementation research is available. Many states have adopted a system-oriented approach to population service delivery that provides a framework for school psychologists to act as systems-level consultants and program evaluators. Research approaches have become more sophisticated with tools available that range from strategies to evaluate single-case design research (Shadish, Hedges, Horner, & Odom, 2015) to big data approaches (Sullivan, Weeks, Kulkarni, & Nguyen, 2020) that allow researchers to find compelling population trends.

On the other hand, we find no evidence that the field has moved far away from an individually focused profession (Bradley-Johnson & Dean, 2000). Available reports repeat findings from

decades ago that most of the practicing school psychologists' time is spent in assessment and individual consultee centered consultation with little follow up or evaluation. It is a troubling paradox that a self-proclaimed field of scientist-practitioners cannot use its own research to revolutionize school psychology practice in the service of student and educator well-being. Trainers of school psychology graduate students, and those in charge of continuing education for health service psychologists, please take special note. We continue to believe that school psychologists are uniquely placed within a system of incredible importance to child development. No other psychological specialty has this daily access to the ecologies that affect human development in such crucial ways. What an opportunity to contribute to health promotion and risk reduction. Let's grab that opportunity!

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