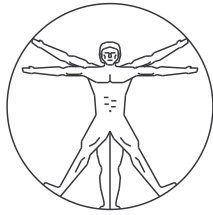




Conversations: Find your Niche



School Psychologist

“You have to be organized because people will need you in a lot of different venues. You need to have very good social skills. You need to be a diplomat. Sometimes when you are in a meeting you could be placed in a situation where the administrator or the teacher doesn’t agree with the parent. You need to be able to see both sides and offer a route so that both groups of people feel that their needs are being addressed. You need to be respectful of the fact that the parent is the expert on the child. Even if they have a different view, they are still the experts. The child belongs to them.” - Maureen O’Reilly Winseck

Executive Summary: School Psychologist, Maureen O’Reilly Winseck

Typical Education Level:

Master’s or Doctoral Degree in Psychology plus pass State Licensing and Certification examinations or equivalent.

Annual Salary Range* (Hourly Rates):

Entry Level = \$35,000 - \$45,000 annually (\$16.83 - \$21.63 per hour)

Mid-Range = \$45,000 - \$70,000 annually (\$21.63 - \$33.65 per hour)

Upper Range = \$70,000 - \$100,000+ annually (\$33.65 - \$48.08+ per hour)

Job Description:

School Psychologists study the mind and human behavior. They work in elementary and secondary schools. They work with students, teachers, parents, and school personnel to help students learn coping strategies and to solve learning and behavioral problems. They conduct testing and perform counseling. Being a good listener and understanding human nature are important traits in this profession.

* The Salary Range presented here is derived from U.S. Department of Labor data and other credible sources, but should be considered approximate and used for reference only. Salaries for specific jobs vary widely depending on company size, locale, economic conditions and other factors.

Professional: Maureen O’Reilly Winseck

1. Please tell us about yourself and what people, influences, events, or desires led you to your profession.

I was a sixth grade classroom teacher for about nine years. When I got my Master’s degree in middle school math, I became a middle school math teacher for two years. Then I stayed home with my children. I had three of them. When I came back, I started in another Massachusetts town as a Chapter One teacher. I taught math and helped intervention kids. I came to Somers nineteen years ago, originally as a Math Intervention teacher.

Six years ago I shifted positions. I was certified as a school psychologist and that’s the current position I hold now.

I would say that the things that influenced my choice of profession were some experiences that I went through with my own children. I was very impressed with the school psychologist at my children’s middle school. I began to realize how parents need help with more things than just a student having trouble with reading or writing. There can be concerns about feeling, emotions or behavior. The school psychologist was able to help me with my children no matter

what their needs were.

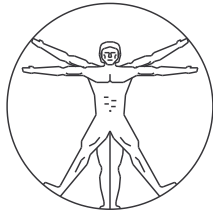
I really began to think, “Wow, psychology would be another way to help kids and their parents during the course of the day.” I loved teaching in the classroom. I loved intervention work as well, but this is the thirty-third year I’ve been in public education. I wanted a change, but I still wanted to stay in a school. It just seemed to hit me at the time that if I wanted to do something different in a school building with elementary and middle school children and still feel like I was helping and giving to the learning community, getting certified as a school psychologist would be the next step. I would still feel fresh and stimulated in what I was doing everyday. I would still be helping, but just in a different way that I had in a classroom.

2. How would you describe the job of a School Psychologist?

Every day and every week is very different. I think that the easiest way to describe my job as a school psychologist is the way a kindergartener once explained it to me. I was doing a lesson in a kindergarten classroom and she asked me what I did in the school. I said that I’m the school psychologist. She kind of scrunched up her face and said, “Well, what’s



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that?" I told her and she stood up and put her hands on her hips, looked me in the eye and said, "So, you are the school's talking and listening lady." That's why my door doesn't say, 'Mrs. Winseck: School Psychologist', it says, 'Mrs. Winseck - Talking and Listening Specialist'. That's what I really do.

I talk and I listen to kids, to parents and to teachers all day long. I try and help them with their problem solving process whatever it may be. Sometimes, these are very personal problems. Sometimes, people need referrals to other levels of help outside of the school. I'm able to do that. Sometimes, they just need to hear that there's somebody around who will listen and care. They just need a good listener to help them sift through the layers of their problem and help them see what they have some control over. When they see that, they can start to solve their problem. They can also see what they can't control. If you can't control something you might as well let it go and not worry about it.

That's the kind of thing that I do all day. I also teach in the fourth grade classes every week. I give social skill lessons. We do anger management, peer pressure, bully proofing strategies, leadership skills, diversity and acceptance. I also go into any classroom a teacher invites me in to help the kids with specific social skills or character development issues. Sometimes the kids invite me in as part of their class meeting strategy. Somebody will say, "Well, why don't we have Mrs. Winseck in?" So I work with the teacher as another facilitator.

3. What are the *most enjoyable aspects* of your work? Why?

The best part of this job is being with the children. Seriously. I can come in really tired, I can come in worried about something and after I've been there for thirty minutes all those thoughts are gone. They keep me very busy. They keep me very focused. They keep me very real.

The little problems of life tend to be put away because you realize that some of these children have really significant issues that they're dealing with at a very young age. When I see that, my problems get put in the "Well, I wonder what I was complaining about?" box. I enjoy being with the children, getting a hug and getting a high five. It's nice when somebody says, "Thanks, I tried that strategy and it worked." It is really satisfying to watch children use the skills I teach to problem solve instead of get frustrated. I like to see them use

their thinking skills. Those are the things that I like about my job.

4. What are the *least enjoyable aspects* of your work and why?

The least enjoyable aspect of my job is parents who won't work with the process. We have incredible teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators here who are more than willing to do whatever they can to be part of the family's educational team. It doesn't happen often, but there are occasions when parents don't believe us. They won't work with us. They see us as working against them.

Luckily, there aren't many like that. Our track record for those who are concerned at first about having a psychologist involved is very good. We tend to win them over. Some take longer than others to build trust. That is the hardest thing. I have never met a child who didn't develop a sense of trust in his team. And I mean that seriously. Some take two sessions, some take three. Some may take two weeks or more, but usually after a couple of visits, after having lunch with myself and the teacher in my office, the child is on board. I have to say that my administrators are incredibly supportive as well as the teachers that I work with. So, I would say that the least enjoyable part of my job is a small number of parents who bring some of their issues to the table. It's hard for them to see us as trusted team members.

5. What is the *most common misconception* that people have about your line of work?

Oh, that's easy. Most people assume, and I mean even people that I've trained with, most people just assume that school psychologists do nothing but test children all day. That's a misconception because it has been fostered.

Most of the people that I went to school with, most of the people I know and most of my formal professors are amazed at the leverage that the school system here has given me. Yes, I certainly do test students, but I also counsel them. I teach in classes. I do parent workshops. I do staff workshops. I do out of district testing. That's what we're trained for. We have as many courses in counseling as we do in testing and assessment.

Many school systems tend to use school psychologists just as an assessor. They lose out on the other half of the training. Fortunately, this is one school system that recognizes both aspects of my training.

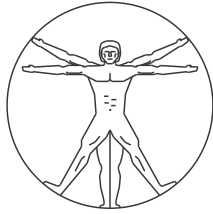
6. What parts of your formal education, work experience, or personal hobbies were the *most helpful* in preparing you for your profession?

Actually, I think being a classroom teacher and also being the mother of three children who had very different learning needs and exposed me to the different aspects of elementary, middle school and high school.

I have often spoken with my former supervisors and



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School Psychologist

professors about the structure and focus of the training we go through. We are required to put in twelve hundred hours of internship and three hundred hours in a practicum. I think the focus of that effort needs to be more specific. I think that every school psychologist needs to be in a classroom for at least solid three weeks.

Most school psychologists, having not been classroom teachers and don't fully understand that world. That's the world that the child exists in. That's the world that we pull them out of and inconvenience the classroom teacher. There needs to be a level of sensitivity for the teacher's day and the child's day. We should not just arrive at the door and say, "I'm taking Charlie now and he'll be gone for an hour and a half."

So, I would say being a classroom teacher helped me prepare professionally. On a personal level, it was being a mom.

7. How open is your field? Are there *good opportunities* for determined newcomers?

Yes. It's not an easy field. I am a closure queen. Once I started it, I wanted to finish it. It was difficult. It took sixty graduate credits beyond my masters. None of the masters' credits counted. It had a three hundred hour practicum and then a twelve hundred hour internship. That took almost a year to do.

The courses were intense. You have to be willing to make the commitment especially if you have a family and kids at home. That's why it took me so long. I had three children and a husband and was working full time. I would do one course a semester and then one or two in the summer. I started in 1988 on my TAGS and my certification. Those are two different things. I didn't graduate until 2000. It's a long haul program. It's not quick and dirty. They train you in both counseling and testing.

8. Beyond the obvious work of being a School Psychologist, what *other activities or skills* does your profession require you to do well?

You have to be organized because people will need you in a lot of different venues. You need to have very good social skills. You need to be a diplomat. Sometimes when you are in a meeting you could be placed in a situation where the administrator or the teacher doesn't agree with the parent. You need to be able to see both sides and offer a route so

that both groups of people feel that their needs are being addressed. You need to be respectful of the fact that the parent is the expert on the child. Even if they have a different view, they are still the experts. The child belongs to them. You only have one part of that child's life in view.

I think you need to have a good disposition. Nobody wants to work with a grump. You have to be a good problem solver because you have a lot on your plate. You have to be able to put what you can control and what you can't control in different boxes.

9. How would a young person with aspirations to become a School Psychologist *best prepare* himself or herself?

You have to have good study skills. You are asked to study and take different levels of qualifying exams at different points in time. There is a certification exam, a licensing exam and different states have different exams. You have the exams in your individual courses to just earn the credit, never mind the certification, the license or the degree. Those are three separate things.

You have to be prepared to work. You have to have a good work ethic. You have to have a good understanding of human nature. You need to be flexible and realize just because your test results said something, it doesn't make you God. Test results are just numbers. What we are really looking at is a child. I call the test results a snap shot of that day in time.

Anyone who is interested in this profession should definitely like the school culture, like the school environment and like the schedule. There are many hours beyond the workday. You are so busy during the day counseling, testing and teaching that you end up doing your scoring and report writing at the end of the day. You will always have homework and you just have to get used to that.

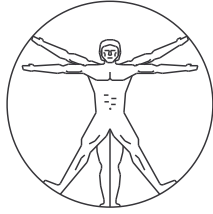
Definitely take any type of psychology classes offered in high school. Take guidance and counseling classes in college. When you go in as a freshman and are not quite sure what you want to do, take one of your electives in the social sciences. You can be a psychologist in a clinical setting, that's a hospital, a clinic, an outpatient facility or a residential facility. You can also be a psychologist having a private business or you can be a school psychologist. I chose to be a school psychologist because it is a culture and a climate that I feel very comfortable working in. I like how it functions. I would probably go crazy if you put me in an office with four walls. I like the pulse of the day.

10. What do you believe are the *keys to enjoying work*?

You have to like kids. You have to be willing to listen to the parents and the teachers. You have to see yourself as a team player. You are not the fount of all wisdom. You are one of the cogs in the wheel. Everybody has to work together to get to the end results.



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The teacher's worry or anxiety about a child is just as important as your observations and test scores. I actually see them as more important because the teacher is the expert, much more than I am after having assessed a child for only three hours. Unfortunately, some school psychologists do see themselves as Gods. We're not. One of my colleagues calls us "worker bees."

11. What is the *most important or significant thing* that you have accomplished in your work to date? What do you hope to accomplish?

I probably would say listening to children and having them realize that there is a listener here. They know that their teachers listen, but talking to the school psychologist is private. There aren't other kids around when somebody comes to see me. I explain to them about confidentiality, that I'm not going to run off to the cafeteria and tell six of their friends.

One student, years ago, said to me, "You know, you're the reason we won the Blue Ribbon." I said, "Thank you very much honey, but I'm just one of the people who worked really hard. There were seven hundred kids, one hundred teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, secretaries and custodians who helped win the Blue Ribbon." He put his hand up and said, "No, you don't understand. You are our listener. If we didn't have you we wouldn't be a Blue Ribbon school because we wouldn't be able to do our work. The kids need a listener, and you're it."

I ran and got some tissues. I would say being a listener for the children and for the teachers is my most significant accomplishment. My principals used to say that if anybody

came into the building with sodium pentothal, the person they would hide behind the boiler down in the cellar would be me because I know way too much. People come in and unload. That's what I'm here for. It's private and people need that.

Looking at the bigger picture, I would like school administrators to recognize what our school has: school psychologists can perform both counseling and testing. I would like school psychologists to be more sensitive to the teacher's environment and the child's environment and not put one hundred percent of the emphasis on the numbers that come out on a test. As I said, that's just a snapshot.

For me, personally, I hope I finish my dissertation so that I can get my doctorate before Christmas because I need my life back.

12. Additional thoughts?

Well, looking back, the only thing I might have done differently is finish school sooner. Still, I think that all of my life experiences have contributed to me being the type of school psychologist that I want to be. Being a parent was a major contributor. Being a classroom teacher was a major contributor.

As it is, I'm the oldest person going to school in most of my classes. I could have given birth to most of the people that I go to school with. My son did his graduate work immediately after college. He got his Ph.D at age twenty-eight. He has his doctorate and his schooling is over. That's a nice position to be in.

So, I might have finished school earlier. I might advocate for young people to get their schooling out of the way early, but not if it means that they don't get to work in a classroom, teach in a classroom or observe in a classroom. I still see that as critical. For me, I did it in the right order. It just would have been nice to have gotten the doctorate ten years ago, but my goals were always to be a wife, a mother and a teacher. This goal to be a school psychologist and a doctor didn't come until fifteen years ago.

Use this space to record impressions and observations about this interview and ideas it may have given you.