

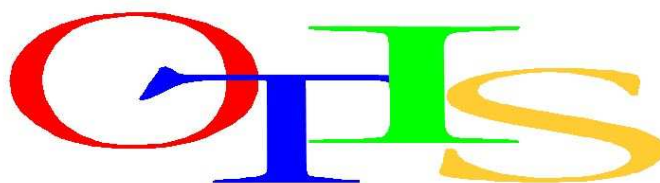
Ask OTIS: Addressing Caseload Concerns

Q: How can I collaborate with my administrator to define the amount of occupational therapy time in our district based on caseload numbers? Should I pursue a caseload cap in our contract through our union?

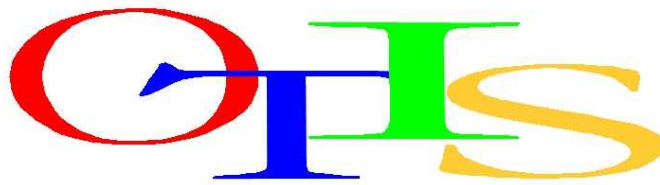
The issue of defining a “reasonable caseload” has been an ongoing challenge for administrators and occupational therapists alike for years. Some therapists have pursued addressing this issue by working with their union to obtain caseload caps based on the number of students served or the number of “direct service” hours on the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in the district that include occupational therapy. However, these caps may create as many challenges as they solve. This is because the evolution of therapy in the schools and current “best” or “effective” practices support more collaborative services including team and systems support (e.g., training teachers regarding sensory strategies that can be used in the classroom; involvement on district literacy curriculum committees), as well as services provided in more natural environments. Thus, defining “caseload” has become increasingly complex. As a result, many therapists are moving towards a discussion of their “workload” with their administrators.

The workload discussion recognizes not only the variety of ways the skills and expertise of an occupational therapist can be used to support student performance and participation, but also the legislation in IDEA 2004 such as response to intervention (RtI), increase emphasis on the general education curriculum and accountability for student outcomes. Thus, workload is defined by all the activities performed by an occupational therapist to ensure student success across educational settings. It should be noted, that the workload discussion supports the most efficient use of therapist’s time and is not designed to decrease the number of students served. Rather, it is to help therapists and administrators design strategies so that therapy services are provided as efficiently as possible (i.e., you may find yourself serving a larger number of students).

In this changing culture of accountability, and efficient usage of resources (including the unique skills and expertise of the occupational therapist), an occupational therapist (or therapy team) and district administrators may want to redefine a therapist responsibility in terms of workload rather than caseload. Occupational therapists may want to start by downloading the document *Transforming Caseload to Workload in School-Based on Early Intervention Occupational Therapy Services* from the American Occupational Therapy Association’s (AOTA) webpage (www.aota.org) and sharing this document with district administrators. Additionally, therapists may want to gather the following data as they prepare to discuss reasonable workload expectations with their administrators:



1. *Do a time study.* Make a table that has all the activities you do (including lunch and break) along one side and the days of the week across the top then make a tally mark for each 15 minute time segment. For example, one day you might spend 30 minutes traveling (2 tally marks), 15 minutes taking to a parent (1 tally mark), 60 minutes evaluating a student (4 tallies), 45 minutes writing an IEP (3 tallies), 15 minutes for lunch (1 tally), get no breaks (0 tallies), 60 minutes in an IEP meeting (4 tallies) and spend the rest of the time working with students, putting in an 8.5 hour day. Use this system to record your time use for at least two weeks and consider repeating the time study at different times of the year. This is very good data to share with your administrators regarding the activities you need to perform in a typical week and the amount of time it takes to perform them.
2. *Do the math.* The amount of time available for an OT to see students in a week per one FTE is 25 hours: a 6 hour school day minus a 30 minute lunch and two 15 minute breaks equals 5 hours a day or 25 hours in a week. Show your administrators the amount of time you have available to serve students by subtracting time needed for all of your other duties: travel time, planning time, evaluation time, writing IEPs, etc. One half hour before and after school is not enough for all of those other activities.
3. *Share your current schedule.* Show your schedule to your administrators and ask them for feedback on how to balance all the tasks you do. Be sure to explain what you have already done to increase your efficiency (such as serving students in groups, reducing referrals by educating teachers, etc.). Find out if they have suggestions for prioritizing your work activities.
4. *Use official documents.* Review the licensure law, special ed. WACS, and official AOTA documents regarding OT process (e.g., *the Occupational Therapy Framework*), documentation, role in the school setting, etc. Don't forget to review the *Code of Ethics* as well. Use these documents to support your position and share them with your administrator. Explain the consequences of not following the laws or violating the Code of Ethics.
5. *Collaborate with other related service providers.* Other related service providers such as speech therapists and physical therapists may be experiencing the same workload frustrations. Work with the speech therapists in your district to access the ASHA documents on Workload vs. Caseload. Identify strategies that could address the workload/caseload concerns of all related service providers.
6. *Read current research and data regarding service delivery.* IDEA 2004 requires that the services we are providing are based on evidence and research as much as possible. You may want to explore the AOTA evidence-base practice resources available on their website and the information from McMaster University (CanChild website). Additionally, a paper Occupational Therapy: Effective School-Based Practices within a



Policy Context Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education (www.copsse.org) may help you explore current research regarding school-based services).

Occupational therapists in the schools need to respect the limited resources many of our districts are facing and need to evaluate how services are provided and how to be as efficient, effective and evidence-based as possible. We then need to get better at “respectfully engaging” in “challenging conversations” to explore how to meet the diverse needs of all students in the districts where we work. We need to go into those conversations with all the data – not just what others are doing or our preference for how things should be done, but with the IDEA language/expectations, AOTA documentation, data unique to our district and current research evidence.

This article was written by Yvonne Swinth, Dottie Handley-More, and Sara Woodward, OTIS Co-Chairs. It originally appeared in the WOTA Newsletter in August 2007 (Volume 66, Number 4 p. 7).

OTIS (Occupational Therapists In Schools) is a standing committee for the Washington Occupational Therapy Association (WOTA) that was set up to help support therapists in school-based practice.