



Ask OTIS: Salary & Contract Negotiations

Q: How are salaries calculated for occupational therapists employed by school districts? Do occupational therapists make the same as other certificated staff members? Are there any important points that should be included in an employee's contract (e.g., specific wording, caseload number caps, etc.)?

School-based occupational therapists within Washington State are required to obtain certification as an Educational Staff Associate (ESA). For occupational therapists employed by school districts, their base salary will indeed be the same as other certificated staff members in the district and based on the Washington K-12 salary allocation schedule for certificated instructional staff. The base salary schedule is reflective of both years of experience and degrees/credits earned. Once a base salary is determined, there are other options a district may consider including stipends, a one year experience advance in salary, extra days paid at per diem, etc. Information about what a specific district offers its ESAs can be located within the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) between the school district and the local education association.

It may be beneficial for occupational therapists considering entering school-based practice to request a copy of a district's Base Salary Schedule and CBA to get an idea of what their salary would be. If ESA language does not exist within the CBA, interested therapists may also want to inquire as to what has been done in the past for ESAs in their district. Did the district use contracted therapists or therapists from the ESD? Has the district developed its own contracts?

Case load/workload caps are challenging issues right now as many districts do not even have class size caps, only "goals". Important questions to ask in the absence of such language are: What assistance will be available when the workload becomes too great? and What will be the process for accessing this assistance? Additionally, there is no requirement at this time for districts to give credit for previous experiences outside of schools. For local education associations looking to strengthen collective bargaining agreement language for ESAs and for individuals who have some negotiating room, this may be a reasonable request. For example, a small district that has historically utilized contracted services or an OT employed by the ESD may wish to hire their own occupational therapist and need to develop what may be a first time, individual contract for an occupational therapist.

For more information, please refer to the Washington Education Association's website. You can review information compiled from across the state on special education and ESA contracts at these WEA sites:

- http://www.washingtonea.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=255&Itemid=197
- http://www.washingtonea.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25&Itemid=93.

AOTA members may also want to review the School System SIS Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) at <http://www.aota.org/members/area3/#school>.

This article was written by Sara Woodward, Yvonne Swinth, and Dottie Handley-More, OTIS Co-Chairs. It originally appeared in the WOTA Newsletter in August, 2005 (Volume 63, 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.