

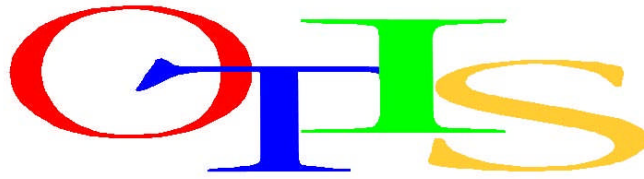
Ask OTIS: Supervision of Occupational Therapy Assistants

Q: I am a COTA in a school district. The OT I worked with last year has moved and we are starting this year without an OT on staff. The special education director is working on the hiring of an OT but wants me to serve students in the mean time. We also have some IEPs coming up very soon and the special education director would like me to write the goals and objectives if the IEPs are due before an OTR gets hired. How much can I legally do to provide occupational therapy services to students without an OT supervisor?

There is an increasing demand for school-based occupational therapists across the state making it difficult for school districts to fill occupational therapist positions and placing occupational therapy assistants in situations where they could be providing OT services under inadequate supervision. Given the possibility of licensure violation, it would be extremely important for you and your employer to review Chapter 18.59 RCW -- Occupational Therapy and the occupational therapy WACs (Chapter 246-847 WAC -- Occupational Therapists), official AOTA documents that address supervision (especially "Guidelines for Supervision, Roles, and Responsibilities During the Delivery of Occupational Therapy Services") and seek guidance from the OT Practice Board. The current WACs are available online. AOTA publishes a complete volume of the official Association documents as *The Reference Manual of the Official Documents of the American Occupational Therapy Association* and a list of their current documents is published each year in the November/December issue of AJOT.

According to RCW 18.59.020(4) an "occupational therapy assistant" is licensed to assist in the practice of occupational therapy under the supervision or with the regular consultation of an occupational therapist. WAC 246-847-010 (2) goes on to define the "supervision" and "regular consultation" of an occupational therapy assistant by an occupational therapist as "face to face meetings" between the occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant "occurring at intervals as determined necessary by the occupational therapist to establish, review, or revise the client's treatment objectives... The failure to meet to establish, review, or revise the client's treatment objectives at sufficient intervals to meet the client's needs shall be grounds for disciplinary action..."

Thus, you cannot provide OT services until your district finds an OT to provide the necessary supervision. The law does allow for "regular consultation" so your district could potentially hire an OT consultant to meet the supervision requirements (they wouldn't necessarily need an OT on staff). An OT would need to determine how much supervision to provide and how often supervision would need to be provided. That determination cannot be made by a district administrator or by you as the OTA. An OT should review your entire caseload with you at the beginning of each school year regardless of the complexity of the children's needs in order to determine whether any changes need to be made in the students' therapy programs. Keep in mind



that while the law leaves it up to the OT to determine the amount and frequency of supervision, it would be important for you to contact your supervising therapist to request additional supervision if needed. For example, if there was an unanticipated change in performance or if the student was not making expected progress it would be appropriate for you to request additional guidance from your supervising therapist.

There is a provision in the WACs that exempts some people from the supervision requirements. According to WAC 246-847-020 "an "occupational therapy aide" for whom an occupational therapist must provide professional supervision pursuant to RCW 18.59.020(5) does not include persons employed at a facility who are performing services under the supervision or direction of another licensed health care practitioner or certified teacher if the occupational therapist serves solely in a consulting capacity to the facility." In this case, the aide would NOT be providing occupational therapy services but helping to implement suggestions from an occupational therapist under the supervision of another professional (such as a teacher). So, if a child had goals and objectives that were "classroom" objectives implemented by the teacher, you could support those objectives under the teacher's supervision. Your experience and training as an occupational therapy assistant would be an asset as you helped to implement the educational program but you would not be providing occupational therapy services. In addition, you could not provide occupational therapy services for a child who required the skills and expertise of an occupational therapist to meet his or her identified outcomes, goals and objectives. In this case, an OT would need to develop the goals and objectives and design an intervention plan. In addition, it would not be appropriate for you to implement the intervention plan without the supervision of an occupational therapist.

Regarding your question about writing IEP goals and objectives, you will need to look to the IDEA and special education WACs for guidance. Goals and objectives must be developed by a qualified professional. In Washington, that would mean a professional with a valid Educational Staff Associate (ESA) certificate (such as an OT, PT, or SLP) or a teaching certificate with a special education endorsement (such as a resource room teacher). So, as an OTA, you could develop IEP goals and objectives (if you have demonstrated service competency in this area) BUT they would need to be reviewed and approved by an OT and the OT would need to develop the intervention plan.

This article was written by Dottie Handley-More, Yvonne Swinth, and Sara Woodward, OTIS Co-Chairs. It originally appeared in the WOTA Newsletter in 2006 (Volume 64, Number 6 pp. 6).

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.