Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ):

Transforming Caseload to Workload in School-Based Occupational Therapy Services

What is the advantage for occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants working in schools in adopting a workload approach?

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants working in schools face increasing demands on their time. They often ask, "What is a reasonable caseload?" Expanding special education caseloads and increased participation in general education early intervening services (EIS) such as Response to Intervention (RtI) have created a need to identify activities beyond traditional caseloads. How well one manages activities such as data collection and analysis, direct services, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, teacher trainings, committee participation, family conferences, and travel between schools will affect the quality and availability of occupational therapy services in special education and general education as well as student outcomes.

What is the difference between *workload* and *caseload*?

The concept of *workload* encompasses all of the work activities you perform that benefit students directly and indirectly, including activities directed toward groups of students, whole classrooms, or school wide populations. *Caseload* refers only to the number of children seen by occupational therapy in special education as part of their IEP.

A traditional caseload "counting" approach does not fully appreciate the complexity of the occupational therapy role in current best-practice scenarios. Pull-out services built around a clinical model of predictable, routine "appointments" have limited support in the educational literature and do not necessarily promote the generalization of skills to the classroom or other appropriate settings. A simple caseload also does not recognize the potential occupational therapy contribution to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004)) participation focus or its mandate that services support access to and progress in the general education curriculum or natural environments.

To meet the needs of children, teachers, parents, and school programs, a workload approach helps in developing work patterns (workflow) that optimize effectiveness and impact. Practitioners must redesign their work patterns so they are able to serve students in their least restrictive environment and at the same time sup-

port their performance needs (e.g., in language arts, during a restroom break or lunch, on the playground or during physical education, getting on or off the bus). Practitioners also must have time in their work days for collaborative teamwork and data collection. A workload approach allows practitioners the flexibility to be where children need them, when they need them—at the point of performance—applying strategies and techniques to classroom activities and tasks.

Why Manage Your Workload?

Expanded roles are now required of providers, including increased teaming and ongoing assessment and documentation of the effectiveness of interventions. The academic focus of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and IDEA requires that supports be provided in the child's natural environment. Interventions are most effective when provided where performance occurs. Managing your workload helps ensure that you are using your time efficiently, are providing appropriate and effective services that support the child's learning and education, and are ensuring proper implementation of IDEA and other legal requirements. In addition, managing your workload can help you

- Facilitate discussions to identify desired therapy roles and responsibilities
- Determine occupational therapy service needs and program capacities
- Advocate for additional occupational therapy staff positions
- Advocate for the distinct contributions of the school occupational therapist by addressing occupational performance through interventions in areas such as RtI, universal design for learning, and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

Determining and managing your workload does not have to be a daunting task. Many school administrators continue to view occupational therapy in relation to how many children can be served in a set period. Clearly identifying your workload—and using this approach to meet the resulting

demands—can help redefine your role in your school(s), helping you move your practice from delivering isolated special education services to proactively solving problems for struggling learners in general education. Approaching your responsibilities from a workload perspective can transform the discussion around your "caseload" from a focus on numbers to a focus on achievements in process and outcomes.

A workload approach can also be used as a management tool to assist occupational therapy practitioners and program administrators in determining personnel and productivity needs. Because of the breadth of occupational therapy services and responsibilities that now encompass both special education and general education, it is just as important for therapists and administrators to be asking, "Are you doing the right things?" as it is to ask, "Are you doing things right?" Recognizing and defining what is appropriate work is a critical part of managing the time of school-based occupational therapy practitioners.

How to Begin a Workload Management Approach

A workload management approach involves collecting data, grouping tasks into categories, analyzing results, and discussing your analysis with your administration.

Step 1: Collect Data

The easiest way to capture all of the things you do in the delivery of your duties is to complete a time study—a written snapshot that includes all of the activities and tasks you perform that benefit your students over a specific time. Data collection can occur over a week, several weeks, or a month (see the sample time study on p. 3, for a 1-week example). A variety of time increments can be used to capture what you are doing; 15-minute intervals are a good place to start. Data should be collected during the same time period for each occupational therapist and occupational therapy assis-

Sample Time Study

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:00–8:15 a.m.	Team Meeting	Claire's evaluation—interview with teacher	LaDamien transitioning off bus	Report writing: Claire	Bobby in PE
8:30–8:45 a.m.	Feeding training for classroom staff	Claire's evaluation—observation	Share LaDamien's transition strategies with teacher	Report writing: Claire	Feeding training for classroom staff
8:45–9:00 a.m.	Travel to next site	Claire's evaluation—phone interview with mom	Travel to next site	EIS/RtI activities in Mr. Smith's class	Case management
9:00am–9:15 a.m.	Michael in Language Arts	Set-up for preschool motor group	Ellen during pre-school snack time	EIS/RtI activities in Mr. Smith's class	Data analysis on Bobby's progress
9:15–9:30 a.m.	Ms. T's 1st grade writing group	Preschool motor group	Join campus Problem-solving Committee Meeting	Katie for preschool snack time	Data analysis on Bobby's progress
9:30–9:45 a.m.	Ms. T's 1st grade writing group	Jacob's IEP meeting	Campus Problem-solving Committee Meeting	Katie for preschool snack time	Travel to next site
9:45–10:00 a.m.	Documentation	Jacob's IEP meeting	Travel to next site	Meeting with Katie's mom to discuss feeding issues	Training/supervision of Billy's aide

tant that is providing services. If you receive requests for services that you are unable to fulfill, keep a separate record of the requests and the anticipated amount of time needed to complete them. The following are examples of what might be included in the study:

- Intervention
- Documentation
- Evaluation (data collection and/or report writing)
- IEP development
- Transition activities
- EIS
- Committee meetings
- Data collection
- Parent conferences
- Trainings for school personnel and/or parents
- Team meetings
- Case management
- Research
- Advocacy
- Support for school-wide activities (e.g., field day, kindergarten screenings)

Step 2: Group Tasks into Categories
After the time study is complete, review your data and group related activities into categories, such as:

- Services directly to the child (individual and small group)
- Activities that support child/student programming (e.g., collaborating with the team, planning meetings)
- Activities that support EIS/RtI activities
- Activities that support other federal, state and local requirements (e.g., documentation, data collection)

For each category, calculate the percentage of your time spent per week performing each activity. Once you have calculated your time allocations, put the information in a chart or table so that you have a visual representation of your work.

Step 3: Analyze Results
The information you collect represents the current demand for occupational therapy services in your program or district. If you are unable to meet all of the demands of your workload, use this information to collaborate with your team, administrators, or supervisors to determine solutions. Achieving a more manageable workload may require thinking of services in new ways. Some suggestions include:

- Determining service frequencies based on individual need rather than historical patterns of 30 or 60 minute weekly time slots. Some students do not need weekly services and can be served every 2 to 3 weeks, monthly, or per semester. Many students will benefit from more services in the first weeks of the school year than is needed after the first weeks, once the environment has been set up for the student.

- Increasing opportunities for indirect services (e.g., services on behalf of the child). These include fabricating materials, providing training aides to use materials or implement strategies, or implementing instructional accommodations and/or environmental modifications.

continued

■ Increasing use of group sessions, including classroom-based groups that model strategies and techniques teachers can use every day

Step 4: Present Data to Your Supervisor

Once you have collected, grouped, and analyzed the data, make an appointment with your supervisor to review your findings. Making an appointment lends importance to the topic and ensures time is set aside to give this issue the attention it deserves. Prior to the meeting, develop a simple agenda with bullets to include topics for discussion. Take to the meeting copies of the agenda and all relevant documentation, including the time-study graphic and supporting lists of individual students with occupational therapy services, the number of classroom or program-based services provided on each campus, trainings provided to school personnel and parents, team meetings, committee participations, and so on. For services for individual students, data regarding reasons for referral, numbers of evaluations administered, and pre-IEP and IEP meetings attended will also shed light on the demand for occupational therapy services. If your schools are not utilizing occupational therapy practitioners as part of their EIS/RtI activities, take this opportunity to identify how occupational therapy can contribute to early intervening efforts to address student learning and behavioral needs. Provide examples of previous collaborations and problem-solving activities you have engaged in at the campus level (such as organizational strategies for middle-school students, including children with special needs during field day games). Share universal design features you can recommend for classroom, cafeteria, or playground environments. Identify training you can provide, as well as large or small group activities you can facilitate or model to support struggling learners in general education, preventing unnecessary referrals to special education. Remember that the goal of early intervening is to identify struggling students early and not to preclude referral for special education services and support, if necessary. Finally, seek input on administrative priorities regarding the use of your time. Investigate whether caseload numbers have been established through your state education agency. Share the new joint workload document that has been developed by the American Occupational Therapy Association, the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, and the American Physical Therapy Association, *Workload Approach: A Paradigm Shift for Positive Impact on Student Outcomes* (AOTA, APTA, ASHA, 2014). If the demand for occupational therapy service is greater than the time available, inquire about options for increasing occupational therapy staffing. As a result of your preparation and the discussion at the meeting, you and your supervisor should be prepared for current and future decision making regarding the availability and delivery of occupational therapy services in your program or district.

References

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (2002).

American Occupational Therapy Association, American Physical Therapy Association, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2014). *Workload approach: A paradigm shift for positive impact on student outcomes.* Retrieved from http://www.aota.org/-/media/Corporate/Files/Practice/Children/APTA-ASHA-AOTA-Joint-Doc-Workload-Approach-Schools-2014.ashx

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. (2004). Pub. L. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. 1413.

Additional Resources

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2011). Occupational therapy services in early childhood and school-based settings. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 65*, S46–S54. http://dx.doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2011.65S46

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2014). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (3rd ed.). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 68*, SS1-S48. Retrieved from http://www.aota.org/-/media/corporate/Files/Secure/Practice/OfficialDocs/Guidelines/Framework%203EdBookR4final.pdf

American Speech-Language Hearing Association. (2002). *A workload analysis approach for establishing speech-language language caseload standards in the schools: Position paper.* Retrieved from http://www.asha.org/policy/PS2002-00122/

Jackson, L. (2013). Best practices in determining school workloads. In G.F. Clark & B.E. Chandler's (Eds.), *Best practices for occupational therapy in schools* (pp. 131–139). Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press.

Jackson, L. (ed.). (2007). *Occupational therapy services for children and youth under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (3rd ed.). Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press.

AOTA® The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc.

This document was developed for AOTA by Jean E. Polichino OTR, MS, FAOTA, and Leslie Jackson, MEd, OT, FAOTA.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) represents the professional interests and concerns of more than 140,000 occupational therapists, assistants, and students working in practice, science, education, and research.

The American Occupational Therapy Association

4720 Montgomery Lane, Bethesda, MD 20814
301-652-AOTA (2682)

www.aota.org

Occupational Therapy: Living Life To Its Fullest®