

An Insufficient Supply and a Growing Demand for Qualified Related Service Personnel

Are School Districts Prepared?

IN THIS WATCH

Nationwide, there are shortages of qualified school-based related service personnel—What districts should know to be prepared.

For many students with disabilities, related services are an essential element of their individualized educational program. Federal law provides that school districts and early intervention programs utilize appropriately trained related services personnel, and that states ensure there is an adequate supply of qualified providers.

However, nationwide, there is a growing shortage of qualified school-based related service personnel. Among those related services affected by personnel shortages are physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, and audiology.

Recruiting and retaining qualified related service personnel in school districts is a challenge for district administrators. Are you prepared to ensure that qualified related service personnel are available in your district? What should you consider when hiring new candidates? Read on to gain insights from the research.

Are You Prepared for Shortages of Physical Therapists?

There has been and continues to be a shortage of qualified physical therapists in the schools. Most shortages are expe-

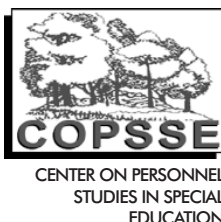
rienced in rural areas. In 1997-1998, the overall vacancy rate for unfilled physical therapy positions was seven percent for children six through 21 years of age, and two percent for children three through five years of age.

Traditionally, few physical therapists have sought employment in schools. There are a variety of reasons why this is so, the most common being that few have an interest and/or specialized training in pediatric physical therapy. Moreover, salaries typically are higher in the private sector (e.g., hospitals).

Although shortages exist, several factors have contributed to a more recent increase in the supply of school-based physical therapists. They are:

- Federal legislation changes affecting Medicare and Medicaid programs have led to a significant decrease in demand for physical therapists in medical and health care settings.
- An increase in physical therapy preparation programs during the 1980s and 1990s has resulted in more potential applicants seeking work.
- Employment of physical therapy assistants—individuals trained at the as-

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sociate degree level who must work under the direction of a physical therapist—during the 1970s and 1980s lowered vacancy rates and shortages of physical therapy personnel in some areas of the country (e.g., rural areas).

What should districts consider when hiring new job applicants? Currently, increasing numbers of physical therapists are seeking employment in the

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Shortages often result in larger ratios of service providers to students. Even with the expansion of consultative and team models for the delivery of services, therapists' expertise often is spread too thin, compromising the benefit to students.

schools. However, many lack the specific knowledge and expertise required to be a successful provider of related services in an educational setting.

Pediatric physical therapy is a relatively small component of most physical therapy preparation programs. Few individuals receive personnel preparation ex-

perience in pediatrics, and those who do tend to have experiences limited to acute care settings.

As of 2002, all entry-level physical therapy preparation programs are now at the master's or doctoral level. Most programs did not add additional coursework in pediatrics or school-based settings.

Are You Prepared for Shortages of Occupational Therapists?

School systems are the largest single work setting for occupational therapists. Within the next

five years, there will be a nationwide shortage of occupational therapists that will affect school districts. The demand for occupational therapists is expected to increase by as much as 35 percent.

Factors that contribute to the shortage of school-based occupational therapists include:

- **Schools are generally not the candidate's first choice for employment.** Although recent federal legislation reduced the number of occupational therapists employed in the private sector (e.g., hospitals), increasing numbers of middle aged and elderly people, along with increased life expectancies, have reversed this trend.
- **Dropping enrollments.** During the next few years, current low enrollments will result in fewer graduates (e.g., enrollment declined 37 percent from 1999 to 2002). If enrollments continue to decline, some programs may close, further limiting future numbers of qualified candidates. There also are limited opportunities for current occupational therapists to pursue additional specialization.
- **Changing standards may affect supply.** The move to require a master's degree for entry level occupational therapists by 2007 may force some preparation programs to close if students cannot meet the entry level requirements or if the programs cannot find faculty with doctoral level preparation. Currently, the demand for qualified faculty exceeds the supply.

What should districts consider when hiring new job applicants? Preservice preparation in

occupational therapy provides a good foundation for working with children but not necessarily for working in schools. Because many occupational therapists enter school-based practice as their first position after graduation, districts should provide support as therapists transition into schools.

Licenses typically are not specific to educational settings. In fact, some practitioners view school-based practice as an advanced or specialized practice area, and some states require specialty licenses in order to work in schools.

Are You Prepared for Shortages of Speech-Language Pathologists?

Nationwide, the majority of school districts report a shortage of qualified speech-language pathologists, with the greatest shortages found in rural and in urban areas. Between 2000 and 2010, more than 34,000 additional speech-language pathologists will be needed to fill demands. This is a 39 percent increase. The total number of vacancies is estimated at 57,000, due to growth and net replacements.

Shortages are exacerbated by the fact that most currently employed speech-language pathologists are not from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Most speech-language pathologists tend not to be proficient in all of the languages spoken by their students.

Further, there is a shortage of doctoral level faculty to prepare new speech-language pathologists. This shortage is expected to increase due to the number of faculty members who will be re-

tiring in the next few years. Typically, one to two years pass before a vacant faculty position is filled. The inability to recruit new faculty may put some programs at risk of closure, resulting in fewer trained professionals available for employment.

Shortages can have a significant effect on the delivery of services. Reported effects include:

- Increased caseloads with decreased opportunities for providing individual services.
- Reduced duration or frequency of services.
- Less opportunity for indirect service delivery, including collaboration and teaming.
- Potential for an increased number of underqualified speech-language clinicians.

What should districts consider when hiring new job applicants? School districts experience difficulties hiring qualified speech-language pathologists for a variety of reasons. Overall, the majority of graduate programs in communication sciences and disorders train generalists who may not be prepared for the unique demands of employment in the schools. This may lead to gaps in professional preparation for the challenges and demands particular to school settings.

Because many school-based skills are not learned in preparation programs (e.g., curriculum-based assessment, development and implementation of educationally relevant intervention plans, collaboration skills, etc.), on-the-job training is expected to provide it. However, the common school practice of assigning profession-

als from other fields (e.g., building principals, special education coordinators, etc.) to supervise new speech-language pathologists complicates the problem. Only 23 percent of speech-language pathologists are supervised by other speech-language pathologists.

Are You Prepared for Shortages of Audiologists?

The significant shortage of qualified school-based audiologists is evidenced by the large number of unfilled vacancies and the employment of uncertified audiologists in school districts. This situation is particularly apparent in rural areas. Recently enacted legislation for universal newborn infant screening may add to the shortage by requiring additional audiologists to serve the needs of children who are placed in early intervention programs sooner than in previous years.

Currently, there is one educational audiologist for every 71,555 students—a significant departure from the one for every 10,000 to

12,000 children currently recommended by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). Even the recommended ratios may be inadequate when considering school-based factors such as:

- Excessive travel time between school locations.
- Large numbers of children with hearing impairments and other disabilities.
- Large numbers of preschool students.
- Number of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and assistive listening devices in use.
- Quantity of special tests provided.
- Extent of equipment calibration and maintenance responsibilities.
- Amount of direct rehabilitative services provided.
- Extent of supervisory and administrative responsibilities.

Other factors also may affect shortages. They include increases in amount of time audiologists

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED...

Strategies to retain qualified related service personnel?

- Make salaries competitive with the private sector.
- Provide adequate work/office space, equipment, and materials.
- Facilitate access to technology and clerical assistance.
- Assign manageable caseloads.
- Reduce paperwork burdens.
- Minimize excessive travel time between schools.
- Provide sufficient time for collaboration with education staff and families.
- Encourage and support professional development.
- Offer career ladders.

are expected to spend attending IEP meetings, and in the amount of time required to address specialized needs of students (e.g., students with digital amplification, cochlear implants, etc.).

What should districts consider when hiring new job applicants? Accreditation is changing as a result of new standards

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Shortages of related service providers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds continue to increase, posing significant recruitment challenges for school districts.

developed by ASHA. One significant change is that candidates who apply for certification after December 31, 2011, will be required to hold a doctoral degree. Audiologists who currently hold ASHA certification will be required to

complete continuing professional development. Licensure requirements will most likely change as most states pattern licenses on ASHA requirements.

The long-term effect of the changing standards on the profession of audiology may include:

- **Shortage of personnel preparation faculty.** The current shortage of doctoral level faculty may pose challenges to the development of doctoral level programs. Programs may be forced to close or reduce the number of entering candidates, possibly affecting future supply.
- **Financial impact.** School districts may pay more for audiology services, because doctoral degrees often command high-

er salary steps on school district salary schedules. Similarly, because third-party billing often requires the use of ASHA-certified providers, costs likely will increase when hiring out of district for audiology services.

- **Changes in content of preparation coursework and continuing education.** It is too early to tell if revamped doctoral preparation programs will be shaped with a school focus. If not, audiologists will continue to receive little training related to school settings.

In Summary

School districts are experiencing shortages of qualified candidates in each of the related service areas featured in this brief. Compounding the issue is the fact that many related service personnel are not interested in pediatrics—or in working in schools as their first choice—and do not receive adequate preparation in school-based issues. District retention and recruitment efforts typically are hampered by such things as salaries that are not competitive with the private sector and inadequate resources.

For More Information


Information reported in this brief was based on the COPSSE issue briefs:

- **Audiology Services in the Schools**, by Susan J. Brannen, Nancy P. Huffman, Joan Marttila, and Evelyn J. Williams.
- **Personnel Issues in School-Based Physical Therapy:**

Supply and Demand, Professional Preparation, Certification and Licensure, by Mary Jane K. Rapport.

- **Personnel Issues in School-Based Occupational Therapy: Supply and Demand, Preparation, and Certification and Licensure**, by Yvonne Swinth, Barbara Chandler, Barbara Hanft, Leslie Jackson, and Jayne Shepherd.
- **Personnel Preparation and Credentialing in Speech-Language Pathology**, by Kathleen A. Whitmire and Diane L. Eger.


These documents can be found on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org.



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