



Re: Letter to Oregon legislature supporting workload study bill and **process**

To: The House Committee on Education

The Occupational Therapy and Occupational Therapy Assistant educational programs of Oregon are writing together to support HB2618, the workload study bill. We also offer our support to the **process** of researching workload approaches if the study bill passes.

Role of OT in schools: Occupational therapy providers in the schools play key roles in supporting children's federally mandated right to a [Free and Appropriate Public Education \(FAPE\)](#). OT providers (OTPs) conduct skilled comprehensive evaluations of a child's needs relative to disability or developmental delay, to determine service eligibility as part of an individualized educational plan, individualized family support plan, or [Section 504 plan](#). Once a child is determined to be eligible and to need occupational therapy services in order to access their education, OTPs (occupational therapists and certified occupational therapy assistants) provide direct and/or consultative services to support them in the school context. These include helping children fully participate in all of the occupations of their school day: activities of daily living, writing to show what they're learning, moving around the school, social-emotional learning, play, and life skills. It is through these occupations that children learn and grow.

Statement of Problem: Although occupational therapy functions as an important and federally mandated related service under [IDEA](#), Oregon does not currently have a mechanism for how their caseload (number of students served) and workload (all of the direct and indirect services through which OT providers support children) should be determined. In order to comply with federal, state, and local mandates, related service providers in the schools need protected time to document, adapt curricula, and to conduct their many roles in supporting students in schools (Cirrin et al, 2003). The lack of caseload or workload approach in Oregon's schools creates situations in which occupational therapy providers are not able to uphold federal and state laws or the Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics. As a result, we see hiring difficulties and high provider turnover, and a failure to meet children's learning needs and educational rights.

Educator perspective: There are two existing and three new occupational therapy programs opening in Oregon; we are writing on behalf of all of these programs in order to communicate our awareness of the need for policy change and to emphasize that the shortage of

school-based practitioners is not about an overall shortage of OT practitioners. Rather, practitioners are aware that it is impossible to uphold the OT Code of Ethics in the vast majority of school-based employment situations in Oregon. As a part of their coursework, occupational therapy and therapy assistant students learn about federal policies around IDEA, the scope of practice for OTPs working in a school setting, and evidence-based best practices. The reality on the ground in Oregon schools does not align with the client-centered, outcomes-based, ethically required approach that students learn about in school. Our students regularly hear from Oregon practitioners that school-based practice involves impossible caseloads and workloads. Even though many students express interest in school-based practice, they hesitate to take school-based jobs in the state of Oregon, preferring to seek employment in other states with more ethical workloads.

Evidence base supporting workload models: The research evidence base supports a workload model for school based practice: workload approach allows for best practice, provider productivity, and effective intervention that meets the individualized needs of students (Garfinkel & Seruya, 2018). It is an especially strong predictor of provider retention (Hutchins et al, 2010). When surveyed, school-based practitioners support a workload model but face administrative barriers to implementation (Seruya & Garfinkel, 2020). One key identified need in the literature which aligns with the proposed study bill is practical resources such as models and guidelines to support workload delivery (Seruya & Garfinkel).

Conclusion: Faculty at our universities include former school-based practitioners who are passionate about school-based practice. We have experience working under workload models and teaching school-based practice to current and future occupational therapy providers, and we are prepared to support the study process. Together, the programs training the occupational therapy and therapy assistant students of Oregon strongly support meaningful evaluation of a workload model and caseload limits for Oregon practitioners.

Signatures

Shruti Gadkari, OTD, OTR/L
Assistant Professor, Pacific University

Caroline Harkins McCarty, PhD, OTR/L
Assistant Professor, Pacific University

Stanley Paul, PhD, MD, OTR/L
Program Director, Occupational Therapy Doctorate, George Fox University

Mashelle K. Painter, MEd, COTA/L, CLA
Department Chair, Occupational Therapy Assistant Program, Linn-Benton Community College

Jennifer S. Pitonyak, PhD, OTR/L, SCFES, CIMI
Director, School of Occupational Therapy, Pacific University

Sean Roush, OTD, OTR/L, FAOTA
Occupational Therapy Director, Western Oregon University

Trevor St. Clair, OTD, MS, OTR/L
Founding Chair, Department of Occupational Therapy Education, Western University of Health Sciences, College of Health Sciences - Northwest

References:

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