



A Union of Professionals

Centering Student Well-Being

Union Strategies to Uplift Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

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"All across the country, we hear school systems announcing bold aspirations to hire more specialized instructional support personnel. While this is a fantastic first step, unions must link these staffing goals with thoughtful long-term plans for sustainable jobs. SISP have great ideas for how to structure their portfolios and rethink workload to maximize the ways they share their skills to benefit all students."

—Randi Weingarten,
AFT president

Specialized Instructional Support Personnel: Workload

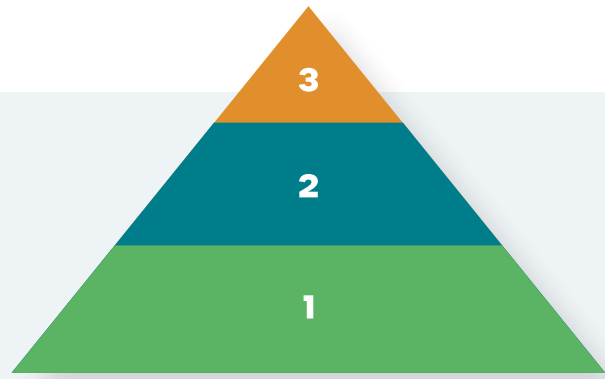
Thoughtfully balanced workloads for SISP can maximize benefits to the whole school community.

Financing models and legislation often depend on recommended ratios established by professional associations that represent SISP. These ratios can be helpful for creating coherent formulas, and they may represent a useful proxy to determine whether a given school community is staffing for a whole-child approach. But provider-student ratios obscure caseload, or the number of students served by a given SISP staffer. And caseload in turn does not clarify workload, the time and effort necessary to address a given worker's caseload. Workload is at the heart of equity issues and potential contract violations.

Untenable workload means the day-to-day work of SISP is often structured to limit their scope of practice to a few students or a few professional skills.¹ Further, when workload exceeds contracted hours, the students served may represent those with the most vocal and savvy advocates, not necessarily those with the greatest needs.

Much like the Medicaid youth benefit, Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) promise universal screening, prevention and early intervention. SISP have the expertise to make these models and promises real. Reasonable workloads help SISP be more effective and may free time to engage in practices that benefit the entire school community. Clear descriptions and quantification of workload can yield important information about staff time and possible elegant solutions.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support



Multi-Tiered Systems of Support build on the U.S. Public Health Service’s conceptual pyramid model of prevention, with primary, secondary, and tertiary approaches. MTSS includes “a continuum of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and practices to offer a comprehensive and responsive framework for systemically addressing barriers to student learning.”²

Tier 3 applies intensive interventions, such as special education and clinical strategies.

Tier 2 interventions target students who need more complementary supports, as well as those considered high-need and/or high risk of undesirable outcomes.

Tier 1 refers to services and interventions offered to all students; these core supports are necessary and sufficient for most to achieve the targeted outcome(s), such as academic proficiency or psychological well-being.

- Michigan speech-language pathologists used workload analysis to demonstrate allocation of work time. Their data helped outline how the district could reduce special education referrals and increase student success. The SLPs’ proposal focused on providing Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions that targeted narrative language skills in kindergartners.³
- In Boston, an executive workgroup undertakes iterative research on implementation of the comprehensive behavioral health model—then aligns supports to staff, schools and the district. Collaborative problem-solving among union workers as well as representatives of Boston Public Schools, the University of Massachusetts and Boston Children’s Hospital regarding systemic schoolwide supports has resulted in more attention to Tier 1 and Tier 2 services as school psychologists and school social workers share skills across their full scope of practice.⁴

Assess and clarify workload—then align resources.

The South Coast Education Service District in Oregon negotiated for a standing, joint labor-management committee to review caseload and workload, and to make recommendations. The committee developed an escalating model to help SISP address workload challenges, recommending staff first “meet with colleague,” then “meet with manager” and finally “refer to committee.” The committee created checklists to support dialogue in the first two steps and a referral form for the final step.⁵

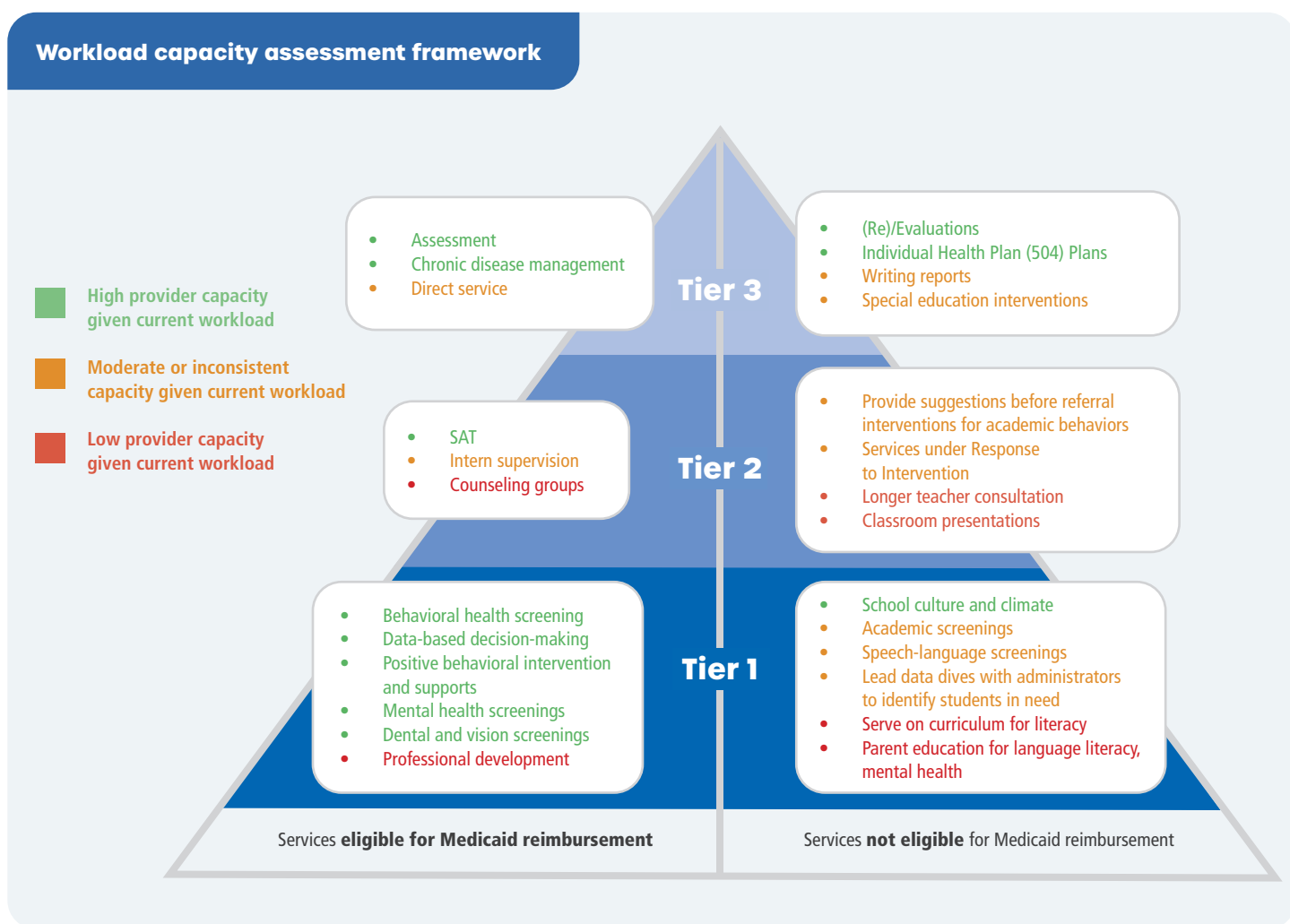
Ohio legislation requires education agencies to use a workload process to determine caseload for individual service providers.⁶ To assist in measuring workload, the state created a workload calculator.⁷ Importantly, if assessment shows that a provider cannot perform all workload duties and meet the direct service or specially designed instruction needs for an assigned child, the education agency must reduce the caseload or workload.

Workload capacity assessment framework

AFT members designed a complementary tool to assess SISP workload in terms of how portfolios align with the promise of MTSS. The framework may be used to analyze job descriptions, funding formulas and/or individual staff workload and calls attention to:

- Beneficial health and academic services;
- Potential Medicaid reimbursement; and
- Staff capacity for delivery and coordination, based on current workload.

AFT encourages affiliates to engage member SISP with framework, replacing the sample text and color-coding in Figure 2 with the specifics of their portfolios and aligning next steps with local analysis.



Workload and Medicaid reimbursements

In overstretched school systems, services delivered may not consistently meet professionally recognized standards of practice—and services that don't meet the standard of care are ineligible for Medicaid reimbursement. In programs that prioritize Medicaid dollars over positive impacts on students, billing can exacerbate workload,

raise significant issues for ethical practice and siphon provider time away from students. On the other hand, thoughtfully reinvested Medicaid reimbursements can help ease SISP workload challenges if the funds support new positions and better distribution of tasks.

Endnotes

- 1 Carlin, C.H., Watt, L., Fallow, W. Carlin, E.L., and Vakil, S. (2013). Caseload Ratio Study: Final Report to the Ohio Department of Education. [Report]. Ohio Department of Education.
- 2 Averill, O. H., Rinaldi, C., & Collaborative, U. S. E. L. (2011). Multi-tier system of supports (MTSS). *District Administration*, 48(8), 91-95. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Claudia-Rinaldi-5/publication/257943832_Research_Brief_Multi-tier_System_of_Supports_MTSS_Urban_Special_Education_Leadership_Collaborative_From_RTI_and_PBIS_to_MTSS/links/00b7d52669f69ded000000/Research-Brief-Multi-tier-System-of-Supports-MTSS-Urban-Special-Education-Leadership-Collaborative-From-RTI-and-PBIS-to-MTSS.pdf.
- 3 Katakowski, D. and Frank, M. (August 2020). Shift to Workload Model Shows Enhanced Learning, Reduced Referrals: Using advocacy, data, and an evidence-based program, SLPs see increased student success after convincing their district to move from a caseload to a workload model. [Article.] *ASHAWire*. Washington, D.C.: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. <https://leader.pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/leader.SCM.25082020.36/full/>.
- 4 CBHM Executive Workgroup. (2020). Comprehensive Behavioral Health Model Annual Report: School Year 2018-2019. Boston: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1l-Hz-BBdZi6HQm0v7FU5HQ5DYF4TUIyEcN6hsqX-rcM/edit#>.
- 5 Bestevenn, J., Hall, C., Voller, C., McNeill, A., Stauff, K., and Wetherell, T. (2020). South Coast Education Service District Work Load/Caseload Committee. <http://www.scesd.k12.or.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Caseload.workload-committee-process.pdf>.
- 6 Ohio Department of Education. (2014). Ohio Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities. <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Special-Education/Federal-and-State-Requirements/Operational-Standards-and-Guidance/2014-Ohio-Operating-Standards-for-the-Education-of-Children-with-Disabilities.pdf.aspx>.
- 7 Carlin, C. (2016). Service Provider Ratio and Workload Calculator. Office for Exceptional Children, Ohio Department of Education. <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Special-Education/Service-Provider-Ratio-and-Workload-Calculator/WorkloadCalculator.xlsx.aspx>.

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