



SPECIAL EDUCATION GUIDANCE

Considerations for Determining Special Education Workloads Wisconsin DPI Special Education Team

Introduction

Wisconsin DPI regularly receives inquiries about calculating special education “caseloads”. One common inquiry is about making fair and informed personnel decisions so each student with an IEP can receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education ([FAPE](#)) through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is properly developed and implemented. Another common inquiry is about determining available “space” to provide special education and related services for the purpose of making [open enrollment capacity decisions](#). More recently, allocating special educator* resources has become an increasingly important system-level topic for public school district administrators as they consider how to provide required special education services to every eligible student during this time of teacher shortages and retention challenges.

*For the purpose of this guidance, the term “educator” refers to appropriately licensed teachers, related services providers, and other staff who may be assigned to implement any portion of a student’s IEP.

Purpose of this Document

This document outlines considerations for those involved in analyzing and making personnel hiring and assignment decisions that affect the workloads of educators who provide special education and related services. This document provides information to help schools and districts develop local criteria and guidelines for making decisions about personnel needs and for analyzing existing educator workloads to ensure each student’s IEP can be implemented as written. We ask readers to keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all way to calculate educator workloads to meet varying needs and unique circumstances found in each school district.

It should be noted that there have been no statutory requirements for special education teacher caseload minimums or maximums in Wisconsin since 1998 when Wisconsin Administrative Rule PI 11 was revised in response to 1997 Wisconsin Act 164. The rule revision removed special education program types along with minimum and maximum enrollment requirements. Since then, Local Educational Agencies (LEA) have determined or set their own policies and procedures for determining special education personnel caseloads, workloads, current and needed capacity for providing services (e.g. “space” in special education).

The only exception is occupational therapy and physical therapy case-load requirements in PI 11.24, Wis. Admin. Code. The [Wisconsin DPI Occupational Therapy \(OT\) and Physical Therapy \(PT\) guide](#) outlines the following: “Caseload requirements for occupational therapists (OTs) and physical therapists (PTs) are in Chapter PI 11.24, Wis. Admin Code. The minimum caseload for a full-time therapist is 15 students. The maximum caseload for a full-time therapist is 30 students, but with a licensed assistant(s) can reach 45 students. Caseload is prorated for part-time therapists. Chapter PI 11, Wis. Admin Code allows for variance among the numbers based on several identified factors. These include the frequency and duration of the service listed on the child’s IEP, travel time, evaluations, preparation, and other student-related activities. Students receiving indirect service or consultation are considered part of the therapist’s caseload.”

It should also be noted that open enrollment space determinations are calculated based on criteria that must be outlined in the board’s open enrollment policy. The school board may adopt space criteria solely for the purpose of open enrollment space determinations; however, the school board must follow its criteria exactly and without exception. The Department does not have model policies or criteria on making open enrollment space determinations; local school districts are responsible for determining their own policies and criteria. The information provided in this document is designed as a starting point to guide discussions about the criteria the board will use to make open enrollment space determinations and more information about this topic can be found in our [Bulletin 16-10 Special Education Space Determinations and Reasons for Denial for Open Enrollment](#).

“Workload” versus “Caseload”

Making personnel capacity decisions that ensure each student with an IEP can receive all of their special education and related services requires more than simply setting a minimum or maximum number of students that can be assigned to each educator’s “caseload”. Instead, schools and districts are encouraged to consider analyzing their “capacity” for providing special education and related services in terms of “workload”. While caseload takes into consideration only the number of students to whom an educator is assigned (e.g. head count), **workload** involves a broader analysis of educator capacity to provide services directly to or on behalf of students. Using a workload analysis to determine special education capacity will help to ensure every student with a disability receives a Free and Appropriate Public Education and supports best practice in teacher recruitment and retention.

Workload analysis accounts for more than just the time needed for personnel to provide “direct” services to students with IEPs such as:

- supplementary aids and services,
- specially designed instruction, and
- related services

In addition to “direct” services, workload analysis considers educator responsibilities that extend beyond direct service to students with IEPs. “Indirect” services provided on behalf of students and families may include but is not limited to:

- program modifications or supports for school personnel (e.g. training and consultation),
- IEP management activities,
- instructional preparation time,
- supervision of paraprofessionals, and other such leadership activities,
- time needed to consult with others,
- adapt curriculum,
- arrange learning environments,
- analyze progress data,
- write evaluation reports,
- draft IEPs, and
- prepare for and participate in IEP team meetings and family engagement activities.

Space in Special Education

“Space” in special education is another term sometimes used when referring to the capacity of a district or school to meet the needs of students with IEPs and is related to caseloads and workloads. However, “space” in special education cannot accurately be determined by a set number of available “special education seats” in a particular classroom or grade. Using a caseload analysis model for determining “space in special education” is often insufficient. When using the idea of available “space” to make staffing and workload capacity decisions, decision-makers are urged to incorporate consideration of the amount of time available for educators to provide particular types of service, the number of students who can receive the service at the same time, and other responsibilities of special education teachers and related service providers outside of direct services to students.

When determining the amount of space for special education students and/or personnel needs, there is no simple or easy formula to calculate workload. Such calculations may even vary from school to school within a district based on system configurations, needs of individual students in a building, or the varied roles of educators who support those students. Typically, calculations of workload account for the amount of time available for providing services, the intensity of student need, and the number of educators available for meeting student needs. The following provide a list of factors that are important in making these determinations.

Considerations when Determining Workload and the Capacity to Provide Special Education and Related Services

State and federal special education regulations require Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to ensure special education services.

- are provided by appropriately licensed educators,
- provide each student with a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), and
- are implemented as written in each student's IEP.

The amount of services needed by any student cannot be determined based upon the student's disability category (label), grade level, age, or general areas of need. Likewise, IEPs do not reflect the concept of a predetermined "program." A student's unique, individual needs must be what determines the content of the IEP and the IEP determines the special education services required to provide FAPE.

To ensure each student with an IEP receives FAPE, approaches to determine the availability of services or staffing needs (e.g. "workload") must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes that may be required due to revisions in individual students' IEPs over time. Examples include but are not limited to changes in student enrollment, student population, including the identification of new students, dismissals from special education, and students transitioning into and out of schools and districts.

Workload Analysis

There is no one size fits all method for calculating workload that will meet the needs of each unique school or district in Wisconsin. It is important to prioritize collaboration, collective responsibility as well as attend to educators' personal care and compassion resiliency to reduce burnout and maximize educator retention. For more information see [Wisconsin DPI Resources to Attract, Prepare, and Retain Special Educators and Related Service Providers](#).

The following are considerations related to workload determinations for special education teachers and related services providers. These considerations identify the expected "responsibilities" of individual personnel (e.g. indirect time during the day such as supporting paraprofessionals) as well as the nature and extent of individual "direct" services students require. **This is not an exhaustive list of all of the workload considerations faced in any school or district. LEAs should also consider any other factors that may be affecting workload for staff given their unique circumstances (e.g. geography, student population, etc.).** When calculating current or future workload capacity of educators, the following factors are recommended for consideration.

1) Special Education and Related Services: Direct Services Outlined in Students' IEPs Based on Each Student's Unique Disability-Related Needs

- Total number of students on educator's caseload
- The amount of total time in a school year calculated to provide services in the program summary for all students with IEPs (i.e. frequency, duration, and amount of services):
 - supplementary aids and services,
 - specially designed instruction, and
 - related services

Type and Location of Special Education Service Delivery

- Scheduling considerations such as student to educator ratios that allow for each student's IEP services to effectively be provided
 - Classroom-based inclusive service delivery
 - Utilization of paraprofessionals to provide supplementary aids and services
 - Resource room
 - Small/large group - grouping students with similar disability-related needs
 - Home or community-based services
- Co-teaching student to educator ratios

Individual Student Circumstances

- Frequency, duration, and amount of supervision required to ensure student safety and health (e.g. none to full day direct supervision for wandering, bathroom, other hygiene, behaviors that interfere with student's learning or learning of others, etc)

2) Child Find and Evaluations

Typical evaluations average 10-20 hours per student.

- The amount of total time in a school year to provide all of the following:
 - child find activities (e.g. universal screenings),
 - review of existing data,
 - conducting assessments including formal and informal assessments,
 - observations,
 - assistive technology trials and functional behavioral assessments, and
 - gathering additional information to complete comprehensive special education initial evaluations and reevaluations.

3) IEP Meetings & Family and Community Engagement

All activities related to meeting with parents, family members, students, and community members to support the needs of each student's IEP.

- The amount of total time in a school year to provide all of the following:
 - preparing for IEP meetings (e.g. analyzing progress monitoring data, writing IEPs, summarizing assessment results)
 - meeting with the IEP team to review and revise the IEP, evaluations, and reevaluation meetings
 - Informal meetings with families to review progress, parent-student-teacher, conferences, home visiting
 - Regular contact with families (e.g. notes, phone calls, texts, home-journals)
 - Meetings with community based providers and services (e.g. mental health providers, behavioral treatment providers, etc.)

4) Building, District, and Statewide Leadership

All activities related to receiving and providing professional learning, serving on decision making groups and problem solving teams, and building or district-wide leadership.

- The amount of total time in a school year to provide all of the following:
 - program modifications and support for school staff (e.g. consultation)
 - coaching, supervising, or supporting other staff (e.g. paraprofessionals)
 - engaging and meeting with school-wide teams (e.g. Equitable Multi-Level System of Support, Response to Intervention, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Family Engagement, Trauma Sensitive Schools, etc.)
 - supporting crisis intervention (e.g. supporting other teachers or individual students in crisis)
 - providing professional learning (e.g. time preparing and providing presentations)
 - receiving professional learning and teacher preparation activities (e.g. prior experience and time needed to build knowledge of evidence based practices to address students' unique disability-related needs required to provide FAPE)

5) Other Assignments and Time Considerations

Additional time required to support individual students with IEPs, building-wide responsibilities, and number of days anticipated to work.

- The amount of total time in a school year to provide all of the following:
 - general supervisory responsibilities (e.g. recess, lunch, hallway, transitions)
 - community based support (field trips)
 - Medicaid billing
 - programming and maintaining assistive technology devices
 - transportation and transition from student to student, class to class, or transporting a student during school day (e.g. class to class, building to building, community based instruction)
 - itinerant services (e.g. travel time between schools and districts)
 - number of days anticipated not at work (e.g. personal, vacation, sick)

The Following Should NOT be Used to Calculate Workloads

- Type or label of disability category or IDEA environmental codes
- Transportation needs of students (as a related service)
- Availability of staff to provide an IEP service (e.g., educator vacancy)

Considerations for Open Enrollment

If the district does not set any space limitations in one or more type of special education service, all applications are approved unless one of the following apply:

- special education services not available
- there is no general education space in the student's grade
- habitual truancy
- expulsion
- special education referral made, but evaluation not completed
- student is age ineligible
- resident district does not have same program (EC, 4K)
- invalid application (late, incomplete, etc.)
- too many applications submitted
- criteria not applicable (for alternative applications only)
- transfer is not in the best interest of the child (alternative applications only)

For more information, see [Wisconsin DPI Open Enrollment Special Education](#) webpage.

Workload Analysis Process

Identify the total amount of time (e.g. days or hours) in the school year educators need to complete the following:

- 1) Provide direct services provided through specially designed instruction and related services.
- 2) Identify the degree to which students are effectively grouped together to receive specially designed instruction and related services. (use this to modify #1 above)
- 3) Provide supplementary aids and services.
- 4) Identify the degree to which students are effectively grouped together to receive supplementary aids and services. (use this to modify #3 above).
- 5) Time conducting initial evaluations and reevaluations (including IEP team meetings).
- 6) Time for indirect services (see examples above of possible additional responsibilities of educators).
- 7) Time needed to support individual educators' providing or receiving mentoring, coaching, and other types of professional learning
- 8) Time for additional considerations and responsibilities of educators (progress monitoring, IEP paperwork, communicating with parents, etc.).

References and Additional Resources

Workload Matrix Samples, WCASS

The Wisconsin Council for Administrators of Special Services (WCASS) provided Wisconsin DPI with sample workload matrix templates used by school districts in Wisconsin. The sample matrix can be found on the Wisconsin DPI [Workload Considerations webpage](#).

[Resources to Attract, Retain, and Prepare Special Educators and Related Service Providers](#), Wisconsin DPI

[Workload Considerations for Effective Special Education](#), Minnesota Department of Education

[ASHA Workload Calculator](#), American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

[Joint Statement from APTA, ASHA, AOTA Workload Approach: A Paradigm Shift for Positive Impact on Student Outcomes](#)

[Workload Calculator Calculations for Full-Time Service Providers](#) and [ODE-OEC MEMO #2016-2](#), Ohio Department of Education

[Guidance in Determining FTE & Workload for Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Speech-Language Pathology Staff](#), North Carolina Department of Education

[NEA Calls For More Accurate Measure of Special Educator Workloads](#), National Educational Association (NEA)



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