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

Are School Districts 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 experienced 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-
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 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 experience 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.

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-
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 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 higher 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.

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