

Recruitment & Retention of School-Based Physical Therapists

Physical therapists (PT) and physical therapist assistants (PTA) provide services to and on behalf of eligible students with disabilities for them to access and make progress in their education as described under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). PTs and PTAs have unique skills and can contribute to school-wide initiatives such as multi-tiered system of supports, school access, and fitness programs. This document highlights considerations for recruitment and retention of PTs and PTAs in public schools. More information is available on the Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy website.

Recruitment Considerations

Many PTs/ PTAs are hired, supervised, and evaluated by a special education administrator who may not be familiar with the roles, responsibilities, and recruitment of a medical professional working in an educational setting. State and local school system human resource departments who hire few related service personnel may not know how to recruit therapists.

PTs/PTAs may not know how to apply for a position in an educational setting or where to find job postings. They are likely to contact therapists already employed in that setting to learn about potential openings. Therefore, special education administrators and human resource personnel must work with their therapy staff to jointly plan recruitment efforts. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn and state and national American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) job posting websites should be considered. One of the best methods for recruiting therapists may be the hiring of PT/PTA students who have completed fieldwork in the local education agency (LEA).

Unlike teachers, therapists generally do not work on a 9-month contract and may look for employment anytime of the year; as a result, application deadlines aligned with teacher contract timelines may limit recruitment. Application forms should include the full educational and employment background of therapists, not just school experience. Consideration should be given to the years of University training to become a physical therapist (6-7 years) or physical therapist assistant (2 years) and the degrees conferred when determining placement on a salary schedule. All physical therapy experience, not just school-based, should be considered when offering salaries and benefits.

Hiring Considerations

As with hiring any professional, experience is important; work experience with children is preferred. Knowledge of child development and the unique elements of pediatric physical therapy evaluation and intervention is key for successful performance in a school setting. If the best applicant lacks experience with children or is a recent graduate, a formal mentoring program should be established to help the PT/PTA have a successful employment experience with positive child outcomes.

Employment Status: PTs/PTAs should be employees of the LEA to maximize investment in this personnel category. In some states, the license a PT holds is “equal” to the state certification of teachers. This certification allows for teacher salary scales and other benefits including union membership to apply to therapist employment. In other states, a PT might be a classified employee who is not placed on the teacher salary scale and does not have the same benefits,

making this type of employment less attractive. Classified employee status is not commensurate with the graduate degree and licensure required of a PT.

Mentorship and Professional Development: Working in public schools is a unique practice area for PTs/PTAs. Providing a designated mentor such as an experienced PT, other related service provider if there is not another PT, or an outside mentor may improve job performance and satisfaction. In states that require additional courses to support new staff, PTs/PTAs should participate in a course specific to their professional needs.

Retention Considerations

Investing and engaging in the expertise of related services staff can support efficient and effective services to students, and reduce costs associated with recruiting, hiring, and training highly qualified PTs/PTAs.

Continuing Education: PTs/ PTAs must maintain their license to practice through their state regulatory agency. In some states, PTs must also maintain a license/certification through the state department of education. PTs/ PTAs must participate in continuing education that is relevant to their specific practice. Coursework, workshops, and conferences related to pediatric physical therapist practice should be considered commensurate with teacher specific trainings and recognized as fulfilling any LEA requirements for salary and benefit advancement. Paid time to attend continuing education should be in alignment with policies related to teaching staff. These professional development opportunities may be organized by the LEA, professional organizations, or other parties. Membership in the APTA and Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy provides access to evidence-based education, tools, and support important to maintaining high standards of practice; therefore, LEAs should consider reimbursement of organizational dues.

Advanced Certification: PTs may choose to complete advanced degrees or become a Board-Certified Pediatric Clinical Specialist through the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties. Specialist certification is equivalent to an advanced teaching certificate such as a national board-certified teacher and should be afforded the same recognition and benefits.

Workload: The scope of PT/PTA practice in schools includes a variety of tasks including services to and on behalf of students, IEP/504 documentation, program documentation, attendance at IEP/504 meetings, and travel between buildings. These tasks create a complex workflow that is not adequately captured by calculating minutes of service time on IEPs. A workload model recognizes the range and scope of provider roles and responsibilities as well as the intersections between licensure, state and district responsibilities, and IDEA mandates. Unmanageable workloads present challenges for the therapist and may lead to professional dissatisfaction and attrition of staff. The document, [Workload Approach: A Paradigm Shift for Positive Impact on Student Outcomes](#), provides additional recommendations to support workload.

Work Environment: Most PTs/PTAs work with students and staff in a variety of buildings and programs. The itinerant nature of their jobs often means they are overlooked when allocating resources such as desk space or technology such as computers and cell phones. Providing these resources to PTs/PTAs is critical to efficient and effective job performance.

Ethical Considerations: PTs/PTAs are bound by State physical therapy practice regulations aligned with licensure and the APTA Code of Ethics. The intersection between a team driven approach to decision making as a function of IDEA and professional ethical responsibilities can

create challenges. This is particularly apparent in decisions related to assessment and the need for services. PTs/ PTAs may be pressured to make service decisions that are not aligned with evidence-based practice. Administrators who are familiar with these legal and ethical considerations can effectively support PTs/ PTAs in navigating these challenges.

PT Administrative Engagement: PTs who work in a variety of schools can provide a unique perspective on curriculum, instruction, and student participation. An invitation to attend administrative meetings and collaboration with district administrative personnel on district wide initiatives, curriculum development, quality assurance, and performance appraisal can be mutually beneficial.

PT/PTA Students and Interns: Just as training future educators is an important role for teachers, so too is training the next generation of PTs/PTAs. PT/PTA students are required to have fieldwork experiences as part of their degree programs. Students assigned to school practice often find the work professionally challenging and satisfying, cultivating their interest in acquiring a position post-graduation. By supporting this training process, districts are able to hire and maintain staff that have become familiar with district policy and procedures while developing the skills needed to support student outcomes. PTs/PTAs often also find working with future therapists fulfilling and an important professional role and responsibility.

School districts need to maintain a highly qualified workforce in order to serve students with disabilities and fulfill the mission of IDEA. State and local education agencies may benefit from implementing specific strategies to enable the recruitment and retention of school-based physical therapists.

©2021 by the APTA Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy, American Physical Therapy Association, 1020 N Fairfax St, Suite 400, Alexandria, VA 22314, www.pediatricapta.org.

Developed by the APTA Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy School Special Interest Group, with expert contributions from Amy Barr, PT, DPT, Susan Cecere, PT, MHS and Susan K. Effgen, PT, PhD. FAPTA.

The APTA Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy provides access to these member-produced fact sheets and resources for informational purposes only. They are not intended to represent the position of APTA Pediatrics or of the American Physical Therapy Association.