

FACT SHEET

Successful Participation for All Students: The Role of School-Based Physical Therapists Beyond a Related Service

INTRODUCTION

Physical therapy, although primarily classified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a related service, can greatly benefit students without disabilities. Pediatric physical therapists are the “practitioners of choice”¹ to apply evidence-based practices regarding the general growth and motor development of all students, as well as health, wellness, fitness, injury prevention, and obesity management. Benefits emerge from using the expertise of physical therapists already present in school systems, as they are engaged with students, staff, and parents, and are knowledgeable about educational mandates, regulations, and local programs. Established competencies for physical therapists working in schools include implementation of school-wide screening programs in collaboration with school nurses, physical education teachers, and classroom teachers and promotion of staff and student safety and wellness.² The purpose of this fact sheet is to describe the role of physical therapists in supporting successful participation for all students in the school setting to encourage physical therapy practitioners to think beyond the services they provide to students through the IEP process and consider the support they can offer to the broader school community.

PHYSICAL THERAPY’S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

All domains of students’ learning and development are interwoven. Wellness and motor skills are essential for academic success.^{3,4} Physical therapy practitioners’ educational background, thorough understanding of human development and motor proficiency, and scope of physical therapist practice renders them uniquely qualified to facilitate wellness and skill development. It is well-established that physical activity is paramount to academic success; however, the fact that academic achievement is predicated on the mastery of movement skills has not yet been widely accepted.⁵ Physical therapists can foster academic performance, student engagement, and obesity prevention⁶ by influencing school programs, practices, routines, and curricula to address engagement and motor proficiency of students in developmentally appropriate ways. Optimal global child development, including the development of motor skills, forms a solid basis for education.

ROLES FOR SCHOOL-BASED PHYSICAL THERAPISTS

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) embraces the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health model (ICF), which encourages school-based physical therapists to address the whole student including personal and contextual factors as well as students’ personal strengths. School-based physical therapy practitioners serve as knowledge brokers between understanding existing educational recommendations regarding physical activity (as it pertains to building academic achievement, obesity prevention, and health promotion) and implementing these policies at the local level (e.g., local education agencies (LEAs)/public school units (PSUs), early intervention programs, preschools, and Head Start).⁷ School-based physical therapists collaborate with other specialized instructional support personnel and school community members to build student achievement in all developmental domains that can affect academic success and wellness. With the support of physical therapy, the connection among the principles of the ICF model, Multiple-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RtI), the Universal Design

for Learning (UDL), and the CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model can make instruction accessible to every student.

Though the expertise of school-based physical therapists is most often considered for individual students, it can and should be tapped to motivate the entire school community to incorporate developmental and movement activities, promote education in the least-restrictive environment, and prevent inappropriate placements and unnecessary services. One of the ways this expertise is expressed is in the support of students is RtI.

WHAT ARE MULTIPLE-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT, RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION, UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING AND THE WHOLE SCHOOL, WHOLE COMMUNITY, WHOLE CHILD MODEL?

Multiple-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a broad, wholistic, sustainable framework leveraging all the resources and personnel in a LEA/PSU to promote wellness and learning. MTSS encompasses RtI, mental health initiatives, social and emotional supports for students and the school community.¹¹ The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities defines RtI as “an assessment and intervention process for systematically monitoring student progress and making decisions about the need for instructional modifications or increasingly intensified services using progress monitoring data.”⁹ It is a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs (RtI Action Network).¹⁰ RtI can help schools identify students who have not had quality instruction in the past and those who truly need special education. The RtI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. Struggling learners are provided with evidenced based interventions at increasing levels of intensity to address their specific learning needs. These services may be provided by a variety of personnel, including general education teachers, special educators, and specialists. As movement specialists', physical therapists play an important role in these general education interventions and initiatives to meet the needs of all learners.¹⁰ UDL is “an approach to teaching and learning that gives all students equal opportunity to succeed.”⁸ There is flexibility in how students can access information, engage with the curriculum, and demonstrate what they know. The CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC model) is a unified and collaborative approach designed to improve learning and health in schools.¹²

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION AND HOW IS IT IMPLEMENTED?

Response to Intervention (RtI) works to identify students who are not performing as expected within the general education curriculum. RtI reviews the curriculum and how it is being implemented prior to referral for special education. Various strategies are then used to assist students who are not benefiting from the standard curriculum.¹³ Response to Intervention (RtI) is delivered through a tiered, high-quality, and scientifically based classroom instruction, which includes universal screening, ongoing student assessment and progress monitoring in the general education environment.⁹

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION IS A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM

- Tier 1: 80% of all students are successful in the core curriculum. Students receive high quality, scientifically based instruction provided by qualified personnel.
- Tier 2: Approximately 15% of students are not making adequate progress in Tier 1. These students are provided with interventions matched to their levels of performance and rates of progress.
- Tier 3: Approximately 2-7% of students receive 1:1 intervention that target the individual student's skill deficits. Students who do not achieve the desired level of progress in response to these targeted interventions are then referred for a comprehensive evaluation and considered for eligibility for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA).^{10, 14}

TABLE 1: HOW PTS CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS AT THE VARIOUS TIERS

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| Tier 1: Universal Interventions <i>Equips teachers with knowledge and strategies to address student needs within their classrooms</i> | Serve as a knowledge broker by providing school-wide education in the form of in-services, handouts, infographics and conversations | Typical student development and indicators of academic readiness Existing educational policies regarding physical activity, specifically the impact on physical activity and academic performance and the importance of recess and motor learning Environmental/Routine/Schedule modifications or equipment to enhance learning and participation The role of the school-based physical therapist, including how to support other levels of RtI and instructional personnel |
| | Collaborating with schools in the implementation of Universal Design for Learning | Assisting in environmental, routines, and/or schedule design to enhance academic performance Identifying common barriers to learning or accessibility on campus Assisting schools and districts with ergonomic design of new buildings or renovations Assisting in planning for playground accessibility to support participation for all students Assisting with the development of core curriculum standards and activities in motor development for all students Assisting with the implementation of schoolwide self-regulation or active learning programs |
| | Collaborate with school teams to develop appropriate motor programs for all students by training instructional personnel to incorporate physical activity into students' daily routine | Proprioceptive and vestibular activities, such as brain breaks and sensory pathways Daily motor activity Incorporating movement into academic instruction and curriculum Preschool motor activities |
| | Tier 2: Targeted Interventions <i>Focuses on finding solutions for students who need supplemental support to successfully learn</i> | Participating in building-level/problem-solving process at grade/class subgroup level Directly supporting teachers Supporting individual students Supporting the transition process |
| | | Reviewing teacher data to help address classroom challenges Suggesting alternative materials, strategies, or activities to promote participation and performance for remediation and enrichment Exploring environmental triggers to behaviors in daily routines Identifying barriers to student participation in self-care including accessing bathroom and cafeteria Suggesting purposeful activities for classroom and leisure time Helping teachers set up their classroom environments facilitate student success Assisting teachers in modification of community work sites or tasks Consulting with teachers/classroom staff regarding student specific motor concerns and providing explicit instruction on requirements for pre-vocational, self-care, or motor skills |
| | | Consulting with parents regarding student specific participation barriers Observing/screening students for motor delays in compliance with district/state guidelines Training school personnel to run a short-term targeted skill intervention group Providing opportunities to increase independence with self-care routine during school day |
| | | Participating in implementation of work readiness programs for students preparing for post-secondary transition ¹⁴³ Helping to create opportunities for students to practice simulated work skills |
| | Tier 3: Intensive Interventions <i>Supporting student specific goal-directed intervention based on IEP and/or assessment</i> | Providing school-based physical therapy aligned with competencies ² Supporting accommodations and modifications to the special education program based on the IEP ² Providing training for school and classroom staff on student specific needs in order to increase carryover into the daily routine of the student Working with team members to develop relevant and routine based collaborative goals. |
| | | Collaborating with the transition team to maximize community participation in preparation for post-secondary transition. Collaborating for instruction supporting health and/or the physical education curriculum |
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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