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Speech-Language & Audiology Canada
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SAC Position Paper on

Speech-Language Pathology Caseload and Workload Issues in Schools

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A position paper represents the direction CASLPA has taken on a particular topic or provides guidelines for particular areas of practice. These positions are time-bound, representing the thinking at a particular point in time.

Position

It is the position of Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC) that speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) working in schools should adopt a workload approach that recognizes the full range of services they provide and all of the activities they are required to perform in their roles as essential members of educational teams. Advocacy must be directed at provincial and territorial governments, school boards, and other key stakeholders to ensure that speech-language pathology workloads are manageable and that all students have the support needed to participate, be included, and attain their social, academic, and vocational goals in school.

Background

S-LPs are essential members of educational teams, who support students of all ages with speech, language, and communication challenges to achieve their academic and personal potential. All students deserve access to timely, comprehensive, and evidence-based speech-language pathology services in Canadian schools (SAC, 2019a). Yet despite their essential role in Canadian schools, a recent report indicated that there are an insufficient number of S-LPs working in Canadian schools to meet the needs of the students who require or would benefit from their services (SAC, 2019b). Reports of inadequate levels of speech-language pathology staffing in Canadian schools are long-standing (e.g., Kaegi et al., 2002).

While the inadequate number of S-LPs working in Canadian schools has numerous implications for students, their families, the education system, and society (SAC 2019a; 2020), a resulting issue that must be addressed is the size and manageability of the caseloads and/or workloads carried by these professionals. Representatives from every province and territory in Canada have identified caseload and/or workload demands to be a pressing issue that must be tackled (SAC, 2019b). Such concerns have also been identified as a significant priority in the literature on occupational stress (e.g., Farquharson et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2010; Marante & Farquharson, 2021).

To address the concerns regarding this issue, the terms “caseload” and “workload” must be defined. Generally, caseload refers to the number of students at any one time who are on the S-LP’s “roster” of clients for whom direct (e.g., individual assessment or intervention) or indirect services (e.g., consultation, collaboration, attending planning meetings) are provided (adapted from American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.). In contrast, workload refers to all activities performed by S-LPs in the course of enacting their roles and meeting their job requirements, such as providing services to students, attending team meetings, participating in relevant schoolwide prevention initiatives or serving on relevant committees, completing documentation and compliance forms, supervising S-LP assistants or education support personnel, and engaging in professional development to maintain professional currency and licensure (adapted from ASHA, 2002). As illustrated in Table 1 in the Appendix, the full scope of workload activities for S-LPs who work in schools, including student-focused services and administrative responsibilities, is extensive.

The consequences of excessive caseload sizes and workloads are substantial – for students, educators and other school staff, individual S-LPs, and the education system. For example, high caseloads and workloads among school S-LPs have been associated with:

- decreased student referrals for speech-language pathology services despite need (SAC, 2019b)
- restrictions in the type of service options available to students and amount or nature of intervention provided (Biancone et al., 2014; Brandel, 2020; Brandel & Loeb, 2011; Dowden et al., 2006; Schooling, 2003; SAC, 2019b; Sugden et al., 2018; Swaminathan & Farquharson, 2018)

- students making less measurable progress in therapy (Schooling, 2003)
- less collaboration between S-LPs, educators, and other school staff (Archibald, 2017; ASHA, n.d.)
- lower job satisfaction for S-LPs (Amir et al., 2021; Blood et al., 2002; Farquharson et al., 2020; Kaegi et al., 2002) and greater levels of workplace stress (Harris et al., 2009, Caesar & Nelson, 2008)
- limited time for S-LPs to engage in evidence-based practice (Hoffman et al., 2013) and professional development (ASHA, n.d.)
- difficulty engaging school S-LPs in providing placements for and supervision of student S-LPs (ASHA, n.d.)
- challenges in recruiting and retaining S-LPs in school positions (Dowden et al., 2006; Edgar & Rosa-Lugo, 2007; Farquharson et al., 2020; Hutchins et al., 2010)

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, The Canadian Physiotherapy Association, and SAC partnered to develop the Caseload Management Planning Tool (CMPT) in 2011. The CMPT involves classifying clients using the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, rating the complexity of the required interventions, and estimating intervention times. Client intervention time is then matched to human resource time to determine the number of clients that can be managed effectively. While this tool may be useful to address caseload/workload demands relative to specific client populations and clinical models of service delivery, its focus on individual disability profiles is not well-suited for use in schools, where characteristics of the student population and school community, pedagogical approaches, classroom environment, and curriculum content need to be weighed in conjunction with the needs of individual students to determine required human resources.

Further to the topic of caseload management, ASHA previously has recommended placing upper limits on the size of caseloads managed by individual school S-LPs (ASHA, n.d.). However, noting there is no research to support a specific caseload size and that caseload size fails to consider how variations in students’ needs and the scope of services provided in the school setting impact the demands on S-LPs’ time (ASHA, n.d.), ASHA has changed its position and now recommends a workload approach. This shift is reflected in ASHA’s joint statement on this issue with the American Occupational Therapy Association and the American Physical Therapy Association, in which all three professional associations recommended “a paradigm shift to a workload model in educational settings as the optimal approach to maximizing student outcomes” (American Occupational Therapy Association, American Physical Therapy Association, & American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2014, p. 5). In recent years, other professional speech-language pathology associations have also recommended that members use a workload approach for school-based practice (e.g., Speech Pathology Australia, 2017).

With respect to implementing or moving toward a workload approach, guidance is available from ASHA as well as other sources that describe how S-LPs and other school-based professionals can complete an analysis of their workload (e.g., see ASHA, n.d.; Cirrin et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2006). In general, these sources recommend similar processes:

1. Gather data about the time spent completing all student-focused and administrative activities for a predetermined period (e.g., documenting use of time in 15-minute intervals over a few weeks, which should reflect time required to support students with varying levels of need).

2. Record any activities that could not be completed and an estimate of the time they would require.
3. Collate data across different activities and staff to identify how time is currently used and where gaps in service may exist.
4. Share these data with relevant stakeholders to problem-solve solutions.

Several solutions have been explored with respect to managing workload, including type of service delivery model (e.g., Garfinkel & Seruya, 2018; SAC, 2020; Swaminathan & Farquharson, 2018), use of virtual service delivery (e.g., Boisvert & Hall, 2019), scheduling approaches (e.g., Cirren et al., 2003), use of S-LP assistants or education support personnel under supervision of the S-LP (e.g., SAC, 2019a), and advocacy for increased resources (e.g., Cirren et al., 2003). Because sufficient research evidence does not yet exist to indicate which solution(s) are optimal, applying multiple approaches is recommended (e.g., Marante & Farquharson, 2021). However, any decision to implement workload management solutions should ensure that services meet students' needs and are evidence informed. A detailed description of [varied approaches to workload management](#) with practical examples is available on ASHA's Practice Portal in the Professional Issues section.

Rationale

Numerous concerns have been raised about the impact of large caseloads and high workloads on speech-language pathology services for students in schools. Excessive caseloads and workloads are known to negatively affect students and families, S-LPs, educators and other school staff, and the education system. This position paper was created to:

- examine speech-language pathology caseload and workload issues in schools,
- assist SAC members and associates working in schools to address these issues,
- identify resources, professional development and/or research needed on this topic,
- support SAC's advocacy efforts regarding speech-language pathology caseload and workload issues in schools.

Recommendations

Four recommendations are put forth in this position paper:

1. That S-LPs working in schools adopt a workload approach
2. That SAC explore existing workload management tools that could be adapted for use by S-LPs working in schools in Canada
3. That SAC commission a national study of caseload and workload issues for S-LPs working in schools across Canada
4. That SAC commit to national advocacy initiatives to secure funding to thoroughly investigate workload concerns and implement solutions

SAC acknowledges the critical importance of addressing concerns about excessive caseloads and workloads for S-LPs working in Canadian schools and the negative impacts that excessive caseloads and workloads have on students, families, professionals, and the education system. SAC recommends that S-LPs working in schools adopt a workload approach that recognizes the full range of services and

activities that are performed in their roles as essential members of educational teams.

School S-LPs need to be able to accurately document the time it takes for them to perform the full scope of their roles in schools, as well as capture the impacts on their services if they are unable to complete the services and activities associated with their role. They also need to be able to share this information in meaningful ways with funders and other stakeholders. To meet these current needs, SAC recommends exploration of existing workload management tools, such as the [ASHA Workload Calculator](#), that could be adapted and evaluated for use by S-LPs who are working in schools in Canada. Such tools offer the opportunity for S-LPs and teams to reflect on how their time is used and consider adjustments that might be made. Additionally, this information may offer a useful starting point for S-LPs to initiate conversations with managers and other administrators about the scope of speech-language pathology services in schools and the time available for all required activities, including those that are student-focused and administrative. Accurate and clear workload data would facilitate S-LPs' ability to demonstrate their contributions and advocate for the human resources needed to ensure all students who require speech-language pathology services in schools can access them.

Importantly, SAC recognizes that individual S-LPs cannot resolve many workload issues on their own and commits to taking an active and leading role in advocacy, education, and professional development about this issue. SAC recommends commissioning a national study to describe accurately the workload and caseload issues formally and empirically for S-LPs working in schools in each province and territory to ensure a full and comprehensive understanding of the problem.

Existing research about the caseloads and/or workloads of S-LPs working in Canadian schools is sparse and dated (e.g., Kaegi et al., 2002). To appropriately advocate for change, SAC and its membership need to have a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which S-LPs working in Canadian schools use a caseload or workload approach, the metrics they are asked to track and report, what issues they experience and how these issues impact them, the services they provide, and the students, families and educators that they serve. SAC recognizes the need for national advocacy to secure dedicated government funding to investigate the workload concerns of S-LPs across the country and to develop, evaluate, and study the implementation of varied solutions to address these concerns.

Comprehensive and consistent workload data from across Canada is urgently required to inform and support advocacy about workload challenges, and to enhance the capacity of S-LPs to deliver high quality services in Canadian schools.

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Table 1. School Speech-Language Pathology Regular Workload Activities

Student-Focused Activities
<p>Activities to support individual students with speech, language, literacy, communication, fluency, voice, and swallowing needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess students for speech, language, literacy, communication, fluency, voice, and swallowing needs. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » contacting families, gathering information from teachers, formal and informal assessment activities, analyzing and sharing results » bilingual/multilingual data collection and assessment activities necessary to differentiate incomplete language acquisition from language disorder, as needed • Reassess/monitor students • Provide individual and/or small group intervention • Plan and supervise work completed by S-LP assistants or education support personnel to enable delivery of additional interventions • Plan and prepare classroom-based lessons to support individual or groups of students • Complete hearing screenings (if applicable) • Write screening/assessment, progress and file closure reports • Plan and prepare home programming as relevant to school-based goals in collaboration with the guardians/family • Perform classroom observations; make recommendations to arrange the environment to support communication goals for the student • Case conference with teachers • Initiate referrals to other professionals within the school system and external to the school system • Complete documentation to support referrals for outside supports • Communicate with families • Provide direct caregiver training • Communicate/coordinate with outside agencies • Attend student planning/team meetings • Analyze demands of the curriculum for individual students and provide recommendations/strategies to teaching staff • Contribute to the development of individual education plan (IEP) communication goals • Contribute to student transition plans and attend transition planning meetings • Program and maintain assistive technology (AT) and alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) equipment • Train teachers, teaching assistants and caregivers to use AT and/or AAC for individual students
<p>Activities to support all students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support screening and identification of students with speech, language, literacy, communication, fluency, voice, and swallowing needs (e.g., interview educators, classroom observations) • Support multicultural student needs. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » bilingual/multilingual data collection

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » assessment activities necessary to differentiate incomplete language acquisition from language disorder » supporting teachers with planning language activities for students learning an additional language <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend student planning/team meetings • Participate in parent/teacher meetings as required • Analyze demands of the curriculum and provide recommendations/strategies to teaching staff regarding the range of needs in their classroom/school • Participate in classroom activities designed to prevent academic, communication, or literacy problems (e.g., whole-classroom lessons, small group work at a centre) • Plan and prepare classroom lessons in collaboration with the class teacher/school team • Design and engage in prevention and intervention activities prior to referral (e.g., collaboratively develop individual programming with teaching staff to implement in their classrooms; offer consultation, in-class supports, and classroom observation; provide environmental supports and adaptations to increase communication opportunities and support learning) • Train teachers and teaching assistants to use AT and/or AAC to support the communication environment for AAC users in the building • Attend Welcome to Kindergarten or similar programs to support transitions for families within education • Provide professional development to school staff and information sessions/workshops to parents
<p>Administrative Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect and report student data • Document services to students and other activities, including services delivered by S-LP assistants • Complete documentation related to contact with parents and other professionals • Complete documentation pertaining to student/family access to benefits, allowances and exemptions • Supervise other S-LP colleagues, S-LP assistants or education support personnel, S-LP students, and communication health assistant students • Disinfect assessment and intervention materials between students • Travel between buildings or to outside agencies • Attend staff meetings • Participate on school department and district committees • Participate in professional order/association activities • Participate in professional development (yearly minimal requirement of college/order/association) • Complete paperwork to comply with requirements of regulatory bodies (e.g., initial and ongoing consent) • Mentor S-LP colleagues

Adapted from:

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