

Occupational Therapy's Role as SISPs Under ESSA

(SISP =Specialized Instructional Support Personnel; ESSA = Every Student Succeeds Act)

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide school administrators and other personnel (e.g. teachers) with information about ESSA and occupational therapy's role in promoting student health (mental and physical) and successful participation throughout the day.



Occupational therapy practitioners* (OTPs)

are health care professionals who help children and youth participate in a range of occupations (i.e. meaningful activities) throughout the day to promote function, health (mental & physical), and quality of life. In schools, this means helping students participate in the academic, social, extracurricular, independent living, and vocational activities needed for student success and transition.

OTPs are indigenous resources in schools that can address the mental and physical health needs of students and are guided by entry-level education in areas related to health (e.g. medical conditions, anatomy & physiology, psychology, group process), human development, and the use of occupations to promote health.¹

*Occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) refers to occupational therapists (OT) and occupational therapy assistants (OTA).

Focus of ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act):

ESSA is general education legislation (2015) representing the sixth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) replacing No Child Left Behind. The focus is on states developing and implementing plans for creating school environments that help all students succeed in school.

Who are Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP)? SISPs refers to over a million professionals, including school counselors, school nurses, occupational therapy practitioners, physical therapists, school psychologist, speech language pathologists, and other professionals that contribute to student health.¹

Who do OTPs provide services to and where?

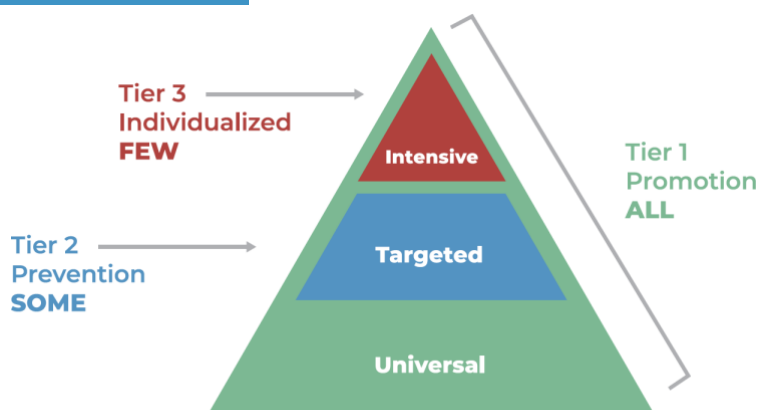
In schools, OTPs provide a continuum of services to students in both special and general education.

- Under IDEA, OTPs provide *related services* to students with disabilities who need OT to successfully participate in and benefit from their special education. Services must be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (i.e. general education context) to the maximum extent possible.
- ESSA legislation provides explicit support for OTPs, as SISPs, to contribute to health promotion and prevention efforts and the creation of positive environments for learning. OTPs focus on helping *all* students participate successfully in health-promoting occupations in the classroom (e.g. sensory processing for self-regulation, stress-reduction activities), cafeteria (e.g. being good friend and having meaningful conversations), recess (e.g. enjoying active play, teamwork), and after-school leisure (e.g. engaging in hobbies and interests).

Multi-tiered Framework: Promotion, Prevention, Intervention

Under ESSA, schools use multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) as a guiding framework. Using SISP supported MTSS, schools can create safe and positive learning environments for *all* students by focusing on school climate, bullying, absenteeism, mental and physical health, and more.

- **Universal health promotion (Tier 1)** – e.g. Foster participation in active play & friendship during recess; promote meaningful conversations and healthy eating during lunch; creating sensory-friendly environments throughout school; adapting materials to foster success; embed activities in the classroom to promote skill development & function (e.g. fine motor and handwriting activities); contribute to UDL (universal design for learning); embed mental health literacy activities.
- **Targeted health prevention (Tier 2)** – e.g. Offer small activity-based groups during lunch and recess for students at-risk of limited participation and/or mental health challenges; modify school environments for students with sensory processing challenges; provide accommodations for students at-risk of health challenges or who show early signs of mental or physical challenges.
- **Individualized intensive intervention (Tier 3)** – e.g. for students receiving special education who need OT to participate and function throughout the school day and for students identified with mental health challenges or disabilities receiving 504 Plans.⁴



OT Areas of Participation

OTPs are knowledgeable about development, underlying skills, and intervention strategies needed for successful participation in **9 areas of occupation** as depicted in the figure on p. 3. Even when an OT referral might be in an area such as written communication, OTPs informally screen for participation & health in the other areas listed.³

Examples of OT contributions to student participation and health:

- Provide small group interventions during lunch, recess, or after school for students at-risk of health challenges (mental or physical) such as mindfulness/yoga groups during recess for students struggling with anxiety and/or self-regulation challenges, lunch bunch groups focusing on social participation, recess groups focusing on healthy play (e.g. walking club), etc.
- Using task analysis, adapt the activity or environment to foster successful participation. For example, creating sensory-friendly areas may enhance feelings of emotional well-being in students with sensory over-responsivity.
- Provide co-teaching in the classroom & embedded strategies to foster participation & learning related to health promotion and prevention. e.g. sensory processing and self-regulation, coping strategies, mental health literacy, etc. Refer to: [The Zones of Regulation](#)⁵, [Alert Program](#)⁶, and [Interoception](#)⁷
- Implement OT universal programs that promote participation and health such as the [Comfortable Cafeteria](#), [Refreshing Recess](#), [Making Leisure Matter](#) and [Calm Moments Cards](#). Refer to: [Every Moment Counts: Promoting Mental Health Throughout the Day](#).⁸

Why focus on student health?



We know that when students are healthy (mentally and physically) they are more likely to participate in and be successful in school. The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model emphasizes the relationship between health and school success and advocates for collaboration between schools, families, and the community.²

Summary

ESSA's focus on creating environments for student success and health opens a door for OTPs to apply our knowledge and skills as health care professionals in schools. By providing services within a tiered framework, OTPs help *all* students participate in a range of occupations and interactions throughout the day that contribute to mental and physical health.

OTPs interested in learning more about ESSA?

Consider joining the *ESSA OT Advocacy Network* co-facilitated by Susan Bazyk, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, Amy Coopersmith, MEd, OTR/L, and Pam Stephenson, OTD, OTR/L, FAOTA. Contact: Susan Bazyk at s.bazyk@csuohio.edu to join.



Developed by: A subcommittee of the *ESSA OT Advocacy Network* (2022). Bazyk, S., Romaniw, A., Virone, Myers, S., M., Greene, S., Fette, C., Thomas, L., Test, L., Thorman, J., Rupp, T.

References:

- ¹ National Alliance of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (NASISP). (2019). <http://nasisp.org/>
- ² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2021). *Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC)*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc/index.htm>
- ³ American Occupational Therapy Association. (2020). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (4th ed.). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(Suppl. 2). <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2020.74S2001>
- ⁴ Bazyk, S. (2011). *Mental health promotion, prevention, and intervention with children and youth: A guiding framework for occupational therapy*. AOTA Press. <https://doi.org/10.7139/2017.978-1-56900-470-8>
- ⁵ Kuypers, L. (2011). *The Zones of Regulation: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control*. Think Social Publishing, Inc. <https://www.zonesofregulation.com/>
- ⁶ Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (1992). *An introduction to "How Does Your Engine Run?"® The Alert Program® for self-regulation* [Booklet]. TherapyWorks, Inc. <https://www.alertprogram.com/>
- ⁷ Mahler, K. (2019). *The Interoception Curriculum: A Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Mindful Self-Regulation*. Mahler. <https://www.kelly-mahler.com/>
- ⁸ Bazyk, S. (2022). *Every Moment Counts: Promoting Mental Health Throughout the Day*. <https://everymomentcounts.org/>