

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 occupational therapy practitioners with core information about ESSA in order to advocate for our role as SISPs and provide services that contribute to 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.

*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. Emphasis is on providing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) focusing on universal (Tier 1) and targeted (Tier 2) strategies that foster participation and health (mental and physical) throughout the day.¹

• **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 psychologists, speech language pathologists, and other professionals that contribute to student health. SISPs work with students, teachers, administrators, and parents to address barriers to educational success, ensure positive conditions for learning, support student physical and mental health, and help all students achieve academically.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 a good friend and having meaningful conversations), recess (e.g. enjoying active play, teamwork), and after-school leisure (e.g. engaging in hobbies and interests).

OTPs, as health care professionals, contribute

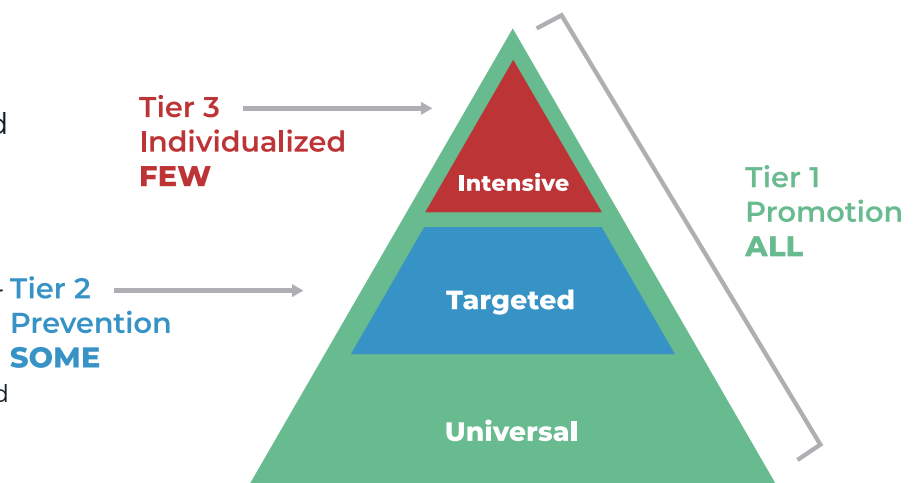
to students' overall health and wellbeing. With entry-level education in areas related to health (e.g. medical conditions, anatomy & physiology, psychology, group process), human development, and the use of occupations to promote health, OTPs are indigenous resources in schools that can address the mental and physical health needs of students.³

Multi-tiered Framework: Promotion, Prevention, Intervention

Schools use MTSS as a guiding framework to focus proactively on all students through various levels of support. Using SISP supported multi-tiered systems of support (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.

OT services provided within a tiered framework,* reflecting promotion, prevention, and individualized intervention, benefit all students with and without disabilities and/or mental health challenges.⁴

*Response to Intervention (RtI); multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS); public health approach to mental health



- **Universal health promotion (Tier 1):** e.g. Foster participation in active play and friendships during recess; promote meaningful conversations and inclusion during lunch; create sensory-friendly environments throughout school; adapt materials or the task to foster success; embed activities in the classroom to promote skill development and function (e.g. fine motor and handwriting activities); contribute to UDL (universal design for learning); embed mental health literacy activities.

Why focus on student health?



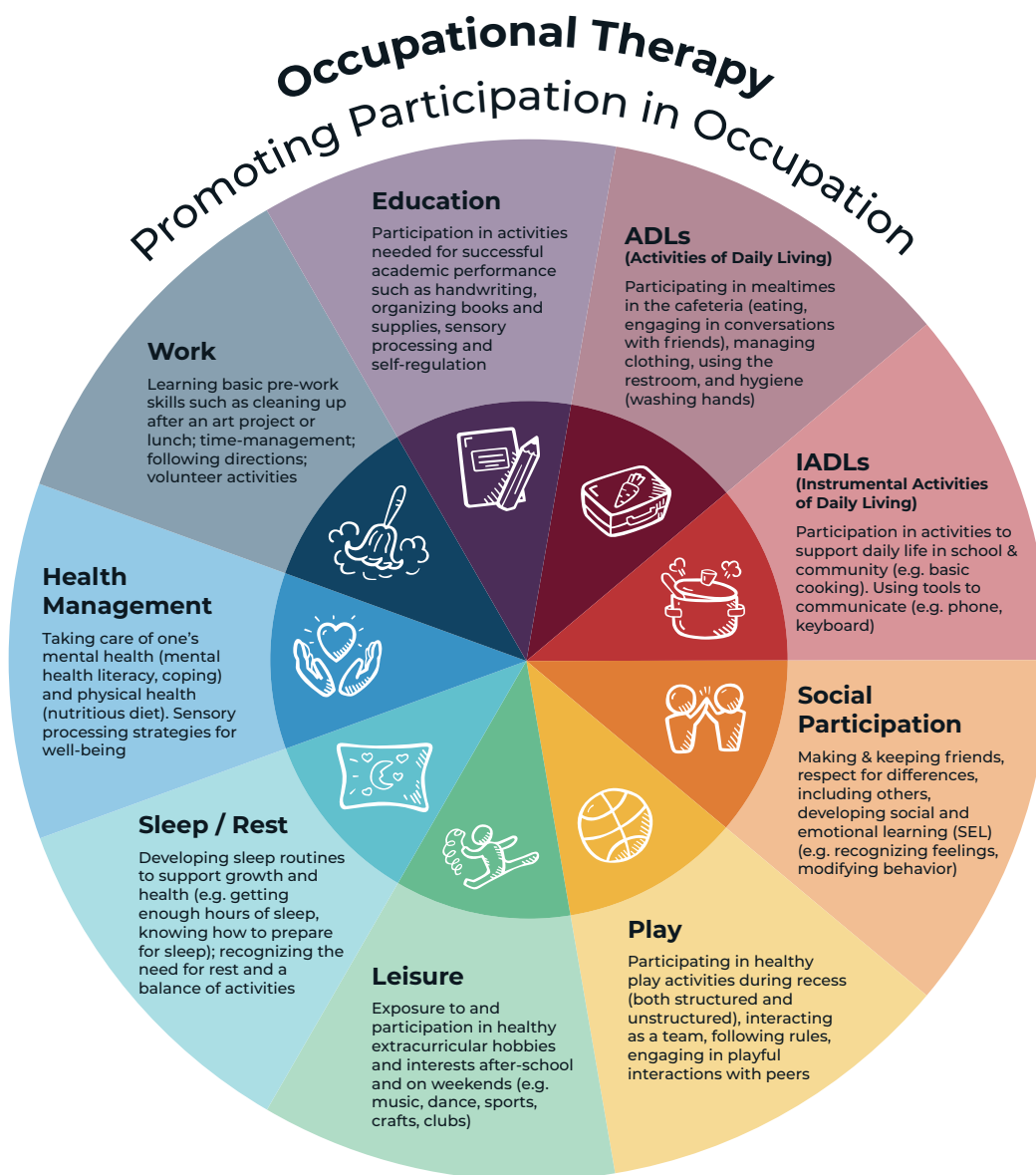
We know that when students are healthy (mentally and physically) they are more likely to participate in and be successful in school. The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model emphasizes the relationship between health and school success and advocates for collaboration between schools,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



- **Targeted health prevention (Tier 2):** e.g. Offer small occupation-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 health challenges.
- **Individualized intensive intervention (Tier 3):** e.g. for students receiving special education who need OT services to participate and function throughout the school day and for students identified with mental health challenges or disabilities receiving 504 Plans.

OT Areas of Participation

OTPs are knowledgeable about development, underlying skills, and intervention strategies needed for successful participation in 9 areas of occupation (i.e. scope of practice) as depicted in the figure below. Even when an OT referral might be in the area of Education such as written communication, OTPs informally screen for and address participation and health in the other areas listed.³



(2022) Bazyk, S.

◎ Distinct Value of Occupational Therapy: Participation in Occupation for Health

(Balance of Occupations, Task Analysis, Modifying the Activity or Environment, Developing Needed Skills) Central to OT practice, is a belief in the positive relationship between participation in a balance of meaningful occupations and health.⁵ Specific to ESSA's focus on creating supportive school environments for student success and health, OTPs are distinctly skilled in analyzing the relationship between a person's skills, the demands of the activity, and features of the environment (i.e. Person-Environment-Occupation or P-E-O).⁶ Just as factors within the student may support or hinder participation, so too can the environment have a positive or negative effect. For example, loud noise in the cafeteria may cause anxiety, irritability, and decreased participation for a student who is over-responsive to auditory input. A core skill for all OTPs is task analysis – the ability to analyze the relationship between the person, environment and activity and determine factors needed for successful participation. When the task-environment demands are greater than the person's abilities, then adaptation of the environment and/or the task may be provided to foster successful participation.⁵

◇ How can OTPs Contribute as SISPs?

Refer to the examples below for how OTP's can contribute as SISPs at multiple levels: school, district, state, and national.

◎ School Level

- Provide services that strategically foster participation in occupations throughout the day that promote health (physical and mental) within OT's scope of practice. E.g. active play at recess, meaningful conversations at lunch, social participation and friendships, learning and talking about how to take care of one's mental health, etc. Talk about (and document) these services with administrators and other school personnel.
- 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 and friendship, recess groups focusing on healthy activities (e.g. walking club), etc.
- Provide co-teaching in the classroom and embedded strategies to foster participation and 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](#)⁷, [Alert Program](#)⁸, and [Interoception](#)⁹.
- Implement occupation-based 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
- Give interdisciplinary inservices to teachers and other school personnel on ESSA, what can be done at the school level by various SISPs (OT, PT, SLP, counselors, etc.) and strategies teachers (classroom and specials) and staff can implement to support the learning and participation of all students.
- Consider joining the PE and art classes periodically to provide suggestions that facilitate participation for all students.
- Join school committees related to students' successful participation, health and wellbeing such as Wellness Committees, PBIS teams, and SEL and mental wellbeing committees.
- Share reliable resources and information sheets about ESSA and OTP's role as SISPs. E.g. [NASISP website](#) and handouts

◇ District Level

- Participate in district Wellness Committees or others related to health and wellness (as mentioned above); share information about OT's scope of practice related to mental and physical health and areas of occupation we address.
- Meet with school administrators and provide education to school board members (brief pre-recorded videos can be very effectively sent to school board members to build knowledge and interest in a topic).

◎ State Level

- Become knowledgeable about your state's ESSA plan and how SISPs are involved.

- Collaborate with a network of OTPs in your state to discuss ESSA and how to advocate for OTP's role. Establish a state school-based Community of Practice (CoP) so OTPs can network and share ideas.
- Identify and share success stories of how OTPs are contributing to health promotion and prevention at Tiers 1 and 2 within general education. Build capacity of OTPs to apply a tiered, public health approach to mental health using [SAMHSA's free online training](#).^{11,12}
- Present on the role of OT in supporting ESSA at state conferences for educators, special educators, and administrators.
- Monitor funding initiatives across the DOE budget spectrum that may align with the work of the provisions of ESSA (MH, SEL initiatives).
- Ask your state OT Association to advocate for OTs role in ESSA. If they are not aware, present at a board meeting.

◆ National Level

- Develop a fact sheet for practitioners to use to educate administrators about ESSA and how OTPs can provide support, addressing practice areas such as mental health as falling under our expertise.
- Host and share podcasts to share information about ESSA and OTPs role as SISPs.¹³
- Continue to work with AOTA to advance ESSA awareness. Join AOTA!

⊙ OT Educational Community

- Assist OT Programs in educating entry-level OT and OTA students about ESSA and OTP's role as SISPs; share success stories.
- Prepare entry-level OT and OTAs to apply a tiered approach to services in schools (Rtl, MTSS). Have students apply a tiered approach to services in assignments and during fieldwork experiences.

◆ 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.

Do you want to connect with OTPs in your state and nationally to learn more about ESSA and how OTPs' are contributing as SISPs? 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. This national network of OTPs meets 3-4 times/year to share information, OT success stories, and written materials. Contact: Susan Bazyk, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA at s.bazyk@csuohio.edu to join.

Developed by a subcommittee of the ESSA OT Advocacy Network (2022). Bazyk, S., Myers, S., Romaniw, A., Virone, 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 Cahill, S., & Bazyk, S. (2019). School-Based Occupational Therapy. In Jane Clifford O'Brien & Heather Kuhaneck (eds.). *Case-Smith's Occupational Therapy for Children & Adolescents (8th edition*, pp. 627-658). Mosby.
- ⁵ 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>
- ⁶ Law, M., Cooper, B., Strong, S., Stewart, D., Rigby, P., & Letts, L. (1996). The Person-Environment Occupation model: A transactive approach to occupational therapy performance. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63, 9-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000841749606300103>
- ⁷ 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/>
- ⁸ 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/>
- ⁹ Mahler, K. (2019). *The Interoception Curriculum: A Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Mindful Self-Regulation*. Mahler. <https://www.kelly-mahler.com/>
- ¹⁰ Bazyk, S. (2022). *Every Moment Counts: Promoting Mental Health Throughout the Day*. <https://everymomentcounts.org/>
- ¹¹ Bazyk, S., Demirjian, L., LaGuardia, T., Thompson-Repas, K., Conway, C., & Michaud, P. (2015). Building capacity of occupational therapy practitioners to address the mental health needs of children and youth: Mixed methods study of knowledge translation. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69(6). <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2015.019182>
- ¹² Nielsen, S., & Bazyk, S. (2019). *Building capacity of school personnel to promote positive mental health in children and youth*. Free self-paced continuing education. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) funded, Mountain Plains MH TTC. <https://healthknowledge.org/course/index.php?categoryid=120>
- ¹³ Davies, J. (2022). OTS 91: What the Every Student Succeeds Act means for OTPs with Abe Saffer, MPM. *OT Schoolhouse podcast*. Schoolhouse Education, LLC. <https://www.otschoolhouse.com/single-post/ots-91>