

# **Moving beyond ratios: A comprehensive approach to determining the need for Specialized Instructional Support Personnel**

## **A JOINT POSITION STATEMENT BY THE Minnesota School Psychologists Association and Minnesota School Social Workers Association**

This position statement represents the views of the Minnesota School Psychologists Association and the Minnesota School Social Workers Association regarding caseload standards for Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP), the collective name for School Psychologists, School Social Workers, School Nurses, School Counselors, Occupational and Physical Therapists, and Speech-Language Pathologists among others. We recommend that educational agencies, professionals and decision makers move beyond using what we contend is an inaccurate “caseload/ratio approach” to recognizing the comprehensive range of workload activities that are performed by and required of SISP to meet the social, emotional, physical health and academic needs of all students.

SISP roles are expanding in ways that make simply documenting caseload (defined as the number of students to whom we are providing services) less meaningful and short-sighted. As Feinberg et al. (2005) argued, the identified “client” is changing. The SISP’s “client” may be an individual student or group of students, a classroom, a teacher or group of teachers, an administrator, a family, the school system or the larger community. Additionally, there is a risk if caseload ratios for each of the different professional associations identified as SISP only look to their identified profession as the provider of choice, and in doing so fail to recognize both the overlap of SISP roles and the importance of the multi-disciplinary team approach to identifying and addressing student needs.

Best practice supports a multi-disciplinary team comprised of a variety of SISP with different backgrounds, perspectives, training and skill sets. The multi-disciplinary team approach can lead to enhanced student outcomes as it fosters a holistic approach to the social, emotional and physical health and academic needs of children and families. This team approach also supports the collaborative pooling of skills and exchange of expertise among SISP to support academic achievement. See attached “Overlapping and Unique Roles of MN Specialized Instructional Support Personnel” Venn diagram.

Research studies of school districts verify that students show significant improvement in behavior, attendance and achievement when adequate SISP are provided. For example, Illinois researchers Durlack and colleagues (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 research studies on social and emotional learning (SEL) involving over 270,000 students over the past 38 years (1970-2007). They determined that teaching universal SEL had significantly positive results in six areas: social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, prosocial behavior, decreased conduct problems, less emotional distress, and academic achievement. When they compared SEL programs conducted by school-based staff (teachers and SISP) vs. non-school trainers (university researchers or community consultants), they found that non-school trainers were significantly less effective, producing positive results for only two of the six areas (social-emotional skills and attitudes). In an era where schools are laying off SISP and contracting with community providers, this is powerful evidence for SISP in our schools. Programs that used all of the SAFE (Sequenced instruction, Active learning, Focused SEL, and Explicit expectations) core components were more effective than programs that did not.

Feinberg et al. (2005) recommended at the very least if one is going to use ratios to set a potential workload range one must also factor in the school context and the specific needs of the population being served (e.g., whether services are being provided within a program for pregnant and parenting teenage students or a sobriety school for students coming out of substance abuse treatment, whether the school includes more intensive Special Education support programs, or whether a particular SISP provides case management services for students). As an alternative to recommending a ratio-based potential workload range for a specific SISP, we propose systematically analyzing the workload of each SISP within the multi-disciplinary team when setting standards. The workload should be systematically assessed at the local level to address the broad range of factors (Student Services Coalition for Effective Education, 2006) that may influence the practice of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel, including:

- Percent of students with significant physical, social, emotional or mental health issues
- Percent of students with disabilities and the number of students that qualify for special education services and 504 plans
- Percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch
- Percent of students eligible for services under the McKinney Vento Act, who are homeless or highly mobile
- Academic achievement/Achievement gaps
- Percent of student who are English Language Learners
- Percent of students with chronic health conditions,
- Percent of students with individualized health and emergency plans
- Percent of teen parent students
- Student attendance data
- School safety/behavioral data/bullying incidents

To help implement this process of assessment at the local level, SISP should be provided with tools to support the systematic tracking of workload, such as an electronic database set up to efficiently track daily activities, a student profile worksheet that includes characteristics and needs of the student being served, and a student services summary worksheet including type and frequency of interventions and specific services rendered including other resources in the local education agency and community available to address the student needs and service outcomes.

For examples of how this has been done, see the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's (ASHA) workload analysis implementation guide (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2003). It is critical to pair this needs assessment with a promotion of a more comprehensive view of the role SISP provide in the education of all students. Promotion of this more comprehensive SISP role will help avoid the practice of stakeholders using the results of the needs assessment to justify cutting services due to their personal beliefs about the relative importance or lack of importance associated with different SISP activities. Empirical focus should remain on the needs of the student population and the ability of SISP to work collaboratively to meet the full spectrum of student needs from universal interventions to tertiary interventions.

In conclusion, staffing of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) should be examined at the local level in collaboration between SISP and administrators. Utilizing a local education agency's student needs assessment will provide a well-rounded picture regarding the myriad of needs specific to the population served while also identifying how using SISP as members of a multi-disciplinary team can best target services and interventions. When

nationally recommended ratios for individual SISP professions are used without considering specific population needs (severity of disabilities, intensity and type of services needed, etc.) they can oversimplify the system needs and the ability of students to access appropriate services..

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