**What is Occupational Therapy?**

- Occupational therapy (OT) enables people to do the day-to-day activities (occupations) that are important to them despite impairments, activity limitations, or participation restrictions.

**Role of Occupational Therapists in Schools**

- The role of the OT in the school system is defined by special education law (IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).
- OT within the public school setting is primarily concerned with the student’s ability to function within the school environment.
- OT enables students to do the day-to-day activities that they need to do in order to participate in their educational program despite physical, sensory, medical, developmental, neurological, social, psychological, and/or emotional impairments.
- OT is a related service under IDEA. Related services become involved with a student with a disability when necessary for the student to benefit from special education.
- Related services, like special education services, must be delivered in the manner that is least disruptive to the student’s educational experience. This is the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate of the IDEA. This means that related service providers and teams must first consider whether a student’s needs can be met through accommodations and consultative services, considering more restrictive service delivery options (direct service) only if necessary.

**Areas OTs May Address in Schools**

- **Self Help Skills:** The student’s ability to manage personal needs within the school setting.
- **Classroom Performance/Participation:** The student’s abilities in areas of attention, organization, social-emotional functioning, and activity level as they relate to school participation.
- **Hand Skills:** The student’s ability to manipulate and manage tools and materials within the school environment. This includes the ability to produce written output to demonstrate learning via paper and pencil and computer.
- **Physical Access & Participation:** The student’s physical status and ability to perform basic motor actions needed to function in and move throughout the educational environment.
- **Social Participation/Play:** The student’s ability to interact with peers in the school environment.
- **Transition to Adulthood:** Upon turning 14, the student’s ability to self-advocate and plan for the role of adulthood, including preparation for employment or further education, independent living and social/community integration.

**School-based Services:**

- **Eligibility** is governed by state and federal law and team decision
- **Purpose** is to enable school participation
- **Service delivery** is in the LRE, often provided through consultation or in-context services
- **Focus** is on what will most efficiently facilitate participation in the school environment

**Medically-based Services**

- **Eligibility** is determined by 3rd party payment and/or individual therapist
- **Purpose** is to remediate disability
- **Service delivery** is typically direct individual or group clinic-based treatment
- **Focus** is on treatment to remediate a disability, medical condition, or injury

**How is school-based OT different from OT in other settings?**

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A student may be eligible for OT in the schools if the following conditions are met:

- **Students** to improve their performance in the school environment (e.g., playground, classroom, lunchroom)
- **Parents** to help them support their child’s learning and participation in school
- **Teachers** to plan and develop activities and environments that include all students
- **Paraprofessionals** to support a child’s success and promote safety in the school
- **Administrators** to recommend equipment for schools, discuss ways to modify existing buildings, classrooms and curriculum to allow access for all students

**Eligibility: when does a child qualify for OT support?**

A student may be eligible for OT in the schools if the following conditions are met:

- The student is eligible for special education under IDEA and the specialized services of an occupational therapist are required to assist the student to benefit from special education.

**OR**

- The student is eligible for a 504 Accommodation Plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the specialized services of an occupational therapist are required to assist the student to access and participate in their educational environment.

**Resources**

- Americans with Disabilities Act
  www.ada.gov
- U.S. Dept. of Education
  www.ed.gov
- Massachusetts Association of Occupational Therapy
  www.maot.org
- American Occupational Therapy Association
  www.aota.org
- Special Education Council for Exceptional Children
  www.cec.sped.org
- Prepared for Medford Public Schools by Lisa Ryan, OTS Tufts University, 2010
  Edited by Jan Hollenbeck, OTD, OTR/L

**What do OTs do?**

- **Problem Solve** (i.e. work with the team to figure out why a child is having difficulty paying attention in class)
- **Educate** student/teacher/parents (i.e. train team members, parents and student in use of specialized equipment or procedures)
- **Design/adapt** activities and environments to facilitate participation (i.e. adapt desk/chair to allow access, design daily routine to minimize fatigue)
- **Establish** a skill or ability (i.e. improve eye-hand coordination so student can accurately copy from the board in class)
- **Maintain** skills needed for participation (i.e. maintain independent access to writing by providing a modified pencil grip)

**How Are OT Services Determined?**

- The school-based OT is part of the educational team.
- OTs complete assessments and collaborate with other members of the school-based team to help determine what is needed for a student to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE).
- OTs collaborate with other members of the educational team to identify a student’s annual goals and determine the accommodations, modifications, supports and services that are required for the student to achieve these goals.
- When the IEP (or 504) team determines that occupational therapy is needed for a student in order to meet his or her annual goals, then occupational therapy is included in the student’s IEP (or 504 Accommodation Plan).