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## Beyond the Caseload: Valuing the Comprehensive Role of School-Based SLPs

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## EDITORIAL

School-based Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) play a vital role in serving students with communication disorders in many school systems, yet districts continue to struggle with chronic shortages and retention challenges. While these shortages are often attributed to recruitment obstacles and competitive private-sector employment, a more central and persistent issue lies in how SLP responsibilities are conceptualized and quantified within school settings (1). Caseload numbers remain the dominant metric for determining staffing, budgeting, and public perception, despite offering an incomplete and potentially misleading representation of SLP workload and professional scope.

The true burden extends well beyond direct intervention minutes and includes extensive responsibilities that remain largely invisible within administrative structures. These tasks include specialized evaluations, legally mandated documentation and compliance activities, regular participation in multidisciplinary meetings, consultation with families and educators, and preventative services embedded within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). When these duties are not formally recognized in workload allocation, they are often difficult to protect and consistently absorb unpaid time, resulting in unsustainable workloads and heightened risk for burnout (2).

A key contributor to this problem is limited understanding of the SLP role among administrators, teachers, and caregivers, many of whom may be unaware of the clinical expertise and legal mandates underlying service delivery. Because SLPs are frequently supervised by individuals outside their discipline, role-specific advocacy can be challenging to advance within broader administrative priorities. Intersecting with these systemic issues are professional norms of high self-expectations and difficulty setting boundaries, which have been reported to intensify perceived workload strain and reinforce unrealistic service expectations. Despite these pressures, school-based SLPs consistently report high satisfaction with their work with students and collaborative teams, indicating that the core of the profession remains deeply meaningful and valued (3,4).

To ensure the sustainability of school-based speech-language services, districts and state agencies should adopt workload-based staffing models, implement standardized accountability tools, and require ongoing professional development to strengthen system-wide understanding of the SLP role (5). Addressing the invisible workload is not merely a matter of occupational satisfaction; it is an ethical and educational imperative. Without systemic change, preventable burnout, workforce instability, and diminished student outcomes are likely to persist, to the detriment of both practitioners and the students they serve.

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