



**Approved
July 2026**
pubpol@exceptionalchildren.org

POSITION STATEMENT

Position on Caseload vs. Workload

Some states have instituted caseload maximums for special education teachers, case managers, and related service providers. However, this frequently overlooks the qualitative complexity and actual demands of special education service delivery, leading to long-term inefficiencies and detrimental effects on both human capital and educational outcomes. Many states have adopted a similar approach to caseload management which is known as a Caseload Approach. In order to account for this disparity in service levels for individual students and providing equity for special education personnel, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) endorses moving to a Workload Approach.

Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) mandates that public schools provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all eligible students with disabilities. In order to meet this requirement, IDEA gives each state the ability to set guidelines for program or service delivery. As a result, some states have instituted caseload maximums for special education teachers, case managers, and related service providers. These maximum caseloads and class sizes are based on the number of students that an educator or related service providers can carry on their respective caseloads at any given time. For example, some states and/or districts set maximums on each caseload based on the number of students of a particular disability coupled with the amount of time the student spends outside the general education classroom. On the surface, this may seem like an accurate measure of an educator's workload, but it frequently overlooks the qualitative complexity and actual demands of special education service delivery. This omission leads to long-term inefficiencies and detrimental effects on both human capital and educational outcomes. Many states have adopted a similar approach to caseload management which is known as a Caseload Approach. In order to account for this disparity in service levels for individual students and providing equity for special education personnel, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) endorses moving to a Workload Approach.

What are the Differences between the Caseload and Workload Approach?

Caseload refers to the number of students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) serviced by special education teachers and related services providers through direct and/or indirect service delivery options. Assigning students to teachers and related service providers solely based on the number of students and the associated disability category is the Caseload Approach. The Caseload Approach does not look at the amount of support or services each individual student receives on a caseload. An assumption made by using a Caseload Approach is that all students that are identified in a particular disability category require the same amount of evaluation, preparation, instructional, consultation, and administrative time to provide FAPE. This assumption is flawed because although students may have the same disability category, the intensity of their needs may differ greatly. A significant percentage of special education teachers (72%) have reported that large caseloads negatively affect their ability to meet student needs, and larger caseloads are perceived to diminish student outcomes on IEPs. Research involving special education teachers in Iowa revealed that while most teachers monitor over 20 IEP goals, more than two-thirds reported meeting less than 25% of those goals, directly linking caseload size to goal attainment. This suggests

The Council for Exceptional Children is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the educational success of children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

that the numerical focus of the caseload model often leads to a compromise in the quality and individualization of services, particularly for students with more complex needs.

The Workload Approach refers to all activities required and performed by special education teachers and related service providers to service students with disabilities. The Workload Approach includes the time spent providing face-to-face or direct services/instruction to students as well as the time spent performing other duties (indirect) necessary to support students' education programs and ensure compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA). A Workload Approach allows the district, organization or agency to calculate how much time is required to perform direct and indirect services. Direct services include but are not limited to: direct instruction in reading, math, and writing, social skills instruction, classroom/resource support, or individual therapy sessions. Indirect services include, but are not limited to: collaboration with staff, administrators, and related service providers, completion of special education paperwork, collaboration with families and outside agencies, and data collection. The workload approach has shown promising results for student outcomes. An exploratory comparison study found that workload approaches, particularly the Workload Management Strategies (WMS) Approach, were associated with desirable levels of IEP progress and ensured students received documented services. A shift to a workload model has been linked to enhanced learning and reduced referrals, with one district reporting a decrease in students with IEPs and an increase in students receiving support through co-teaching, leading to improved narrative language benchmarks (Carlin, 2023). This indicates that by allowing for greater investment in prevention and indirect activities, the workload model can lead to more appropriate service recommendations and improved student identification. The workload approach enables a tailored approach to service delivery, recognizing the varying levels of support students require and ensuring appropriate attention and intervention. Another benefit of moving to a workload approach is teacher retention. Despite enthusiasm for teaching, special educators report higher workloads than their general education colleagues, with more responsibilities than they have time or resources to fulfill well. Special educators are frequently required to attend meetings, conduct assessments, and manage extensive paperwork, often without dedicated time to fulfill these responsibilities well. Excessive workloads are a major factor in special education teachers' burnout and intent to leave, negatively affecting instructional quality and intensifying the educator shortage (Bettini, 2024).

This Table provides a concise comparison of the core distinctions between the caseload/workload approaches.

Characteristic	Caseload Approach	Workload Approach
Definition	Number of students assigned	All activities required and performed
Primary Focus	Headcount of students	Time and effort required
Key Metric	Student-to-Educator Ratio	Comprehensive Task Assessment
Consideration of Service Intensity	No	Yes
Consideration of Indirect Tasks	No	Yes
Adaptability to Student Needs	Low (static; does not adapt to changing needs)	High (dynamic; adapts to unique student needs)
Primary Limitation	Simplistic; ignores complexity of duties and student needs	Complexity of implementation and data collection

Transitioning to a Workload Model:

- 1. Transition to a Comprehensive Workload Analysis Model:** School districts should systematically shift from a caseload-only approach to a comprehensive workload analysis model for staffing and resource allocation in special education. This requires identifying and quantifying all activities and tasks performed by special education professionals, including direct services, indirect services, assessments, administrative duties, and collaborative efforts.

The Council for Exceptional Children is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the educational success of children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

2. **Prioritize Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Districts should invest in tools and processes (e.g., workload calculators, time studies) to collect accurate data on educator workload. This data should inform staffing decisions, resource distribution, and policy development, moving beyond arbitrary numerical limits to a needs-based allocation of personnel.
3. **Foster Administrative Support and Collaboration:** Strong administrative leadership is essential for successful implementation of a workload model. This includes providing adequate resources, promoting a culture of collaboration among educators and support staff, and actively addressing workload concerns to prevent burnout and improve retention.
4. **Advocate for Policy Alignment:** Professional organizations and educators should continue to advocate at state and local levels for policies that align with the workload approach. This includes establishing state-level guidance or requirements for workload analysis, incorporating workload considerations into employment contracts, and ensuring that staffing models support evidence-based practices and the provision of FAPE.
5. **Continuous Evaluation and Flexibility:** Workload models must be dynamic and flexible, allowing for adjustments based on changes in student enrollment, individual student needs, and evolving service delivery models. Regular evaluation and refinement of the workload plan are necessary to ensure its ongoing effectiveness and responsiveness to the diverse and changing landscape of special education.

Sample Calculations of a Workload:

Under a **Caseload Approach**, two teachers might both have **15 students**, appearing "equal" on paper. However, a **Workload Calculation** reveals a massive disparity based on student needs and indirect requirements.

Total Workload Hours = Direct Service Hours x Multiplier

- **Low Intensity (Multiplier 1.5):** 10 hours of teaching = 15 hours of total work
- **High Intensity (Multiplier 2.5):** 10 hours of teaching = 25 hours of total work.

Below is a comparison of two teachers, both carrying a Caseload of 15.

Workload Category	Teacher A (High-Intensity Needs)	Teacher B (Low-Intensity Needs)
Direct Service Minutes	1,200 min (High-frequency 1:1)	600 min (Resource room/Group)
Indirect Support	400 min (Modifying curriculum/ Augmentative and Alternative Communication Device)	150 min (General consult)
Documentation/Data	300 min (Daily behavioral logs)	100 min (Weekly progress notes)
Meetings/Evaluations	200 min (Frequent Manifestation Determination Reviews/Positive Behavior Support Plans)	100 min (Standard annual IEPs)
Required Prep/Lunch	450 min (Standard contract)	450 min (Standard contract)
TOTAL WORKLOAD	2,550 Minutes (106%)	1,400 Minutes (58%)

Workload Calculators:

<https://www.asha.org/slp/schools/workload-calculator/>
<https://www.aota.org/practice/practice-essentials/payment-policy/caseload-to-workload>

Carlin CH. Workload Versus Caseload: An Exploratory Comparison Study of Individualized Education Program Progress and Other Outcomes. *Lang Speech Hear Serv Sch*. 2024 Apr 11;55(2):259-275. doi: 10.1044/2023_LSHSS-23-00075. Epub 2023 Nov 22. PMID: 37992409.

Bettini, E., & Gilmour, A. (2024). Addressing Special Education Staffing Shortages: Strategies for Schools. Overview Brief# 31. *EdResearch for Action*.

https://edresearchforaction.org/wp-content/uploads/55015-EdResearch-Special-Education-Staffing-Brief-31-FINAL-1-1.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com