

School Physical Therapist (PT)

Colorado Educator Licensing Act of 1991; 1 CCR §§ 301-37; 2260.5-R-11.04

What knowledge is required to serve as a school physical therapist (PT), for ages birth to 21?

The school physical therapist is knowledgeable about the legal framework of physical therapy within the public school system, and is able to:

- articulate the letter and intent of state and federal special education law, rule, and policy, including local education agency policy, as related to school-based physical therapy, and including, but not limited to, issues related to safety and liability.
- describe the etiology of various physical and medical conditions that impact the functional ability of the student within the school, home, and community environments.
- articulate the difference between medically-based physical therapy management and general physical therapy management, as a related service under IDEA; and adapt physical therapy management strategies from the medical model to the educational model.
- utilize strategies that consider the influence of diversity on assessment, eligibility determination, intervention planning, and on placement of individuals with exceptional learning needs.

The school physical therapist is knowledgeable about the process of determining eligibility for special education services, related services, and designing and implementing Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) and/or Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs), and is able to:

- implement pre-referral interventions, as part of a special education team that supports the student's participation and performance, within the educational context.
- refer students for special education, when the education team determines that pre-referral interventions have been ineffective or inadequate.
- participate, as needed, on an interdisciplinary team, to evaluate student eligibility for early intervention or special education services.
- adhere to all established confidentiality and due process guidelines and procedures.
- advocate for student access to, and participation in, the general curriculum, and the least restrictive environment.

The school physical therapist is knowledgeable about completing accurate assessments of a student's physical abilities and needs for adaptive equipment, and is able to:

- complete and evaluate observations, and/or screenings, to assess a student's strengths and challenges, within the educational setting.
- provide gross motor and fine motor screenings, to determine if a child is in need of a complete evaluation.

Who are School Physical Therapists and what credentials are required?

To be endorsed as a school physical therapist, for ages birth – 21, an applicant shall hold a bachelor's or higher degree; have completed a physical therapy program accredited by the American Physical Therapy Association's (APTA) Commission on the Accreditation of Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE); have successfully completed an appropriate practicum or internship, as required by the physical therapy program attended; have successfully completed academic preparation for managing children in the school setting; hold a current physical therapy license, issued by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies; and have demonstrated the competencies specified below.



- coordinate data-gathering from, record reviews, interviews, checklists, specific observations, interpretation of medical records, and identification of prescriptions and medications taken, as each applies to the educational environment, and to collaborate or consult with others, when indicated, in order to avoid duplication of services, and/or assessment.
- identify and select valid and reliable assessment methods, to measure contextual factors, activity demands, and student factors, that may be affecting school performance.
- where appropriate, conduct tests and measures of the following areas, and evaluate for performance within the educational setting: muscle strength, force, endurance, and tone; reflexes and automatic reactions, movement skill and accuracy; joint motion, mobility, and stability; sensation and perception; peripheral nerve integrity; locomotor skill, stability, and endurance; activities of daily living; cardiac, pulmonary, and vascular functions; fit, function, and comfort of seating and positioning equipment, prosthetic, orthotic, and other assistive devices; posture and body mechanics; limb length, circumference, and volume; thoracic excursion and breathing patterns; vital signs; and physical home and school environments.
- incorporate strategies that consider the influence of diversity on assessment, eligibility, programming, and placement of individuals with exceptional learning needs.
- identify, and address in planning, environmental factors that may support or hinder a student's performance.
- interpret assessment data to develop and refine hypotheses about the student's performance.
- interpret and communicate, verbally and in writing, the results of the assessment process, for a variety of audiences, including, but not limited to, teachers, paraprofessionals, related service professionals, students, and parents/guardians, as appropriate.
- use proven documented evidence of clinical experience, clinical observation, professional judgment, test results, and evidence in relevant literature, within the context of an IEPs or IFSPs, to plan and develop appropriate and measurable student-targeted outcomes.
- report progress in the attainment of annual goals and objectives, and make appropriate modifications, as needed, to the student's IEP or IFSP.

The school physical therapist is knowledgeable about how to develop and provide related-service support to special education communities, for students with disabilities, and is able to:

- apply current proven effective practice, appearing in the literature, as related to the practice of physical therapy in the school environment, to the development of strategies that can gain maximum access for, and participation in a free and appropriate public education by all students.
- provide appropriate classroom and environmental modifications and accommodations, to facilitate students' ability to receive and participate in an appropriate public education.
- reinforce functional behavior(s), as related to the cognitive, communicative, social/emotional and physical needs of students.
- integrate appropriate equipment, and/or devices, including low and high technology, to facilitate more functional and independent skills, within the educational environment.
- identify safety concerns and appropriate interventions, for both the student and the "provider," in the case of providing physical assistance to the student, to prevent injury.
- identify appropriate strategies and interventions to assist the student in obtaining improved functional academic performance, through consultation, and direct and/or indirect, intervention(s).
- identify and utilize intervention approaches based on established best practices and documented research-based evidence, including remediation, and/or appropriate adaptations for positioning needs, adaptive/assistive equipment needs, and/or the need for physical or manual assistance to perform functional life skills, within the educational environment, home or community.
- provide school physical therapy reports, to students and families, on a regular basis, that coincide with the school district's progress reporting schedule and format.



- directly supervise unlicensed persons at school locations, in accordance with Colorado’s Physical Therapy Practice Act, to facilitate a student’s ability to participate in the educational process.

The school physical therapist is knowledgeable about how to create, communicate in, and sustain effective collaborative relationships, with relevant individuals, families, schools, and communities, and is able to:

- communicate respectfully and sensitively to students and adults.
- communicate effectively with students, families, teachers, and other professionals, including those from the private sector, to appropriately plan for a student’s services, and to avoid duplication of service(s).
- communicate with relevant providers and educators, about the functional impact of students’ disabilities on the ability to perform within the school environment.
- identify resources and strategies that promote effective partnerships with individuals, families, school personnel, and community representatives.
- teach, facilitate, coordinate, schedule, and provide supervision to paraprofessionals, other staff members, and family members/ guardians, as appropriate, to ensure that the IEP and/or IFSP is effectively implemented.
- serve as an advocate for student’s right to the least restrictive environment, in an appropriate public education.
- collaborate with colleagues and the school team, to establish, write, and measure appropriate and relevant student outcomes, that are consistent with the functional skills that must be acquired by students’, so that they become as independent as possible, within the educational environment, at home, and/or in the community.
- facilitate and/or assist in the development of the effective transition of students from one setting to another, in collaboration with the students, their families/guardians, or other professionals, including community representatives, to promote a continued level of functional performance at the new setting.

The school physical therapist is knowledgeable about the ethical and legal standards of physical therapy practice in the State of Colorado, and is able to:

- recognize and address, in planning, the effect of cultural bias on practice.
- evaluate and apply current effective evidence-based practice, as related to school physical therapy.
- practice within the ethical and legal standards of the practice of physical therapy, according to Colorado’s Physical Therapy Practice Act and the American Physical Therapy Association’s standards and policies, and demonstrate compliance with the most current physical therapy code of ethics, of the American Physical Therapy Association.
- routinely evaluate and measure personal performance, as a physical therapist, to ensure therapeutic efficacy and achievement of appropriate outcomes; and participate in professional development and professional organizations, which lead to increased knowledge, and growth in skills and abilities.

This CDE guidance document is meant for clarification, is not legally binding, and is not to be confused with legal advice. This guidance reflects CDE’s recommendations, but Administrative Units (AUs) may have developed their own policies or procedures that differ from those described herein. Be sure to refer to your local AU’s policies and procedures through the Director of Special Education. If you are seeking legal advice, please contact your legal counsel.

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