



# A Closer Look at Caseloads: Challenges in School-Based Speech-Language Pathology Services

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# 5,659

Speech Language Pathologists (FTE)  
employed by California public schools<sup>1</sup>

- 1 for every 1,034 enrolled students
- 1 for every 140 students with a disability of any type
- 1 for every 30 students with a primary disability of Speech Language Impairment

**+** Speech Language Pathologists  
working through contract agencies<sup>2</sup>

School-based speech language pathologists (SLPs) have Master's Degrees in Communications Disorders. They are licensed and/or credentialed personnel working within public school systems to evaluate and treat students with speech or language impairments of varying types and degrees of severity, and concomitant with a variety of special education eligibility categories.

## The role of Speech Language Pathologists is complex.

SLPs employed in educational settings work directly with students providing individual and group treatment to address the unique needs of each student. They work on listening, speaking, reading, writing, communication, and learning strategies in general education and special education classrooms. They also consult with teachers and other professionals about students' academic, communication, and social needs.

In addition, SLPs conduct screenings and diagnostic evaluations, and manage augmentative and alternative communication devices. They regularly document services and write progress reports. They collaborate on the development of Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and facilitate or attend those meetings. They also provide counseling and education to families. In some cases, SLPs serve on early intervention and program planning teams, supervise clinical fellowships, and handle Medi-Cal billing.



According to publicly available data from the California Department of Education, in 2022-23:

**2.5%** of **California** students have a speech/language impairment as their primary disability<sup>3</sup>

**3%** of **California** students have autism, which includes speech/language impairment<sup>4</sup>

“Students have such a diverse level of needs that we cannot just look at numbers.”

- SLP Coach from a Northern CA SELPA

According to publicly available data from the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2022-23:

**19%** of children **nationwide** have a disorder related to voice, speech, language, or swallowing<sup>5</sup>



## There are many students with speech, language & communication needs.

SLPs do not exclusively serve students whose primary disability is Speech Language Impairment. SLPs also assess and treat students with other primary disabilities—for example, autism, intellectual disabilities, other health impairments—and with the following disorders:

- Speech disorders - difficulty producing speech sounds correctly or fluently
- Language disorders - trouble with receptive or expressive language
- Social communication disorders - difficulty with the social use of verbal and nonspeaking communication
- Cognitive communication disorders - problems organizing thoughts, paying attention, remembering, planning, and/or problem-solving
- Swallowing disorders (dysphagia) - feeding and swallowing difficulties



Speech/language impairments negatively impact learning and social interactions. As such, intervention and instruction are critical for ensuring that children affected by such disorders can access the curriculum, realize their academic potential, and engage with their peers.



## SLP caseloads are defined in California law.

Sections of the California Education Code and the California Code of Regulations that define SLP caseloads were enacted in the 1980s. They have not been meaningfully reconsidered since, despite changes in the laws and regulations that govern assessment and identification of disabilities and development and monitoring of Individualized Education Plans—changes that substantially impact the workload of service providers.

### 55 students in K-12 settings

The average caseload for language, speech, and hearing specialists in special education local plan areas shall not exceed 55 cases, unless the local plan specifies a higher average caseload and the reasons for the greater average caseload.

[Cal. Educ. Code § 56363.3]

Caseloads of full-time equivalent language, speech and hearing specialists providing instruction and services within the district, SELPA, or county office shall not exceed a district-wide, SELPA-wide, or county-wide average of 55 individuals unless prior written approval has been granted by the SSPI.

[5 C.C.R § 3051.1]

### 40 students in preschool settings

The maximum caseload for a speech and language specialist providing services exclusively to individuals with exceptional needs, between the ages of three and five years, inclusive, as defined in [Section 56441.11](#) or [56026](#), shall not exceed a count of 40.

[Cal. Educ. Code § 56441.7]



## Actual caseloads of SLPs in California schools are largely unknown and unmonitored.

Data on actual caseloads is non-existent outside of local SELPAs and district information systems and virtually impossible to calculate from publicly available data. A more accurate (though not complete) picture of caseloads emerges from qualitative data.

According to a survey of California school-based speech language pathologists administered by CSHA in 2024, caseloads averaged:

### **64 students in K-12 settings**

On average, full-time, school-based SLPs in California serve 64 students, though caseloads vary dramatically with some reported to be as high as 100+ students<sup>6</sup>

### **48 students in preschool settings**

Due to regulatory requirements, caseloads are somewhat smaller—48 students, on average—for SLPs serving exclusively preschool age students<sup>7</sup>

*Interviews with SLPs, SELPA managers, and CSHA leaders indicate that there is no monitoring or accountability of SLP caseloads at the state level—neither by the State Board of Education nor the California Department of Education.*



According to a nationwide survey of speech language pathologists administered by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) in 2024:

**24%** of SLPs **nationwide** describe their workloads as unmanageable<sup>8</sup>

According to a survey of California school-based speech language pathologists administered by CSHA in 2024:

**77%** of **California** SLPs have considered leaving the field due to unmanageable caseloads

*“The expectation that an SLP can effectively manage 55 students at the elementary level, with services typically 2x a week, even with full-time SLPA support, is unrealistic and detrimental to the quality of care we strive to provide.”*

*-California SLP*



## SLPs describe their workload as unmanageable for the following reasons:

- **Volume of paperwork**
  - writing IEP goals
  - drafting full IEP documents
  - regular documentation for each session
  - quarterly/semester progress notes
  - creating lessons to address the unique needs of each student
- **Number and duration of meetings**
  - initial referrals for evaluation
  - IEP meetings for every student with SLP services
  - communication with parents
  - communication and supervision of support staff
  - communication with teachers about implementation of IEP
- **Complex assessment & evaluation protocols**
  - CDE mandated assessments
  - multilingual assessments
  - assessments for nonspeaking communicators
  - assessments for students with autism, multiple disabilities, or who are medically complex
- **Medi-Cal billing processes**
  - documentation for each student and every treatment session
- **Shortage of providers to fill vacancies caused by**
  - high workload & high caseloads with no accountability
  - insufficient capacity in degree programs



## Unmanageable caseloads have detrimental effects on students and providers.

### Impact for Students

- Shift from individual to group treatment <sup>10</sup>
- Larger group sizes <sup>11</sup>
- Lack of cohesive treatment due to limited SLP time for consultation with teachers and speech language provider assistants <sup>12</sup>
- Lack of consistency in treatment strategies leveraged at home due to lack of SLP time for communication with parents <sup>13</sup>
- Inability to complete individual goals <sup>14</sup>
- Longer time to dismissal from services <sup>15</sup>

### Impact for SLPS

- Occupational stress and burnout <sup>16</sup>
- Attrition in the field <sup>17</sup>
- Difficulties recruiting qualified SLPs <sup>18</sup>

“ I am completely burnt out by the much more intense student needs and parents' needs. The increasing demands [are...] a huge disservice to providers as well as the students. [Providers] are leaving in droves. ”

-Early Career SLP

## ENDNOTES

- 1** Data for total number of full-time equivalent SLPs is based on 2018–19 school year, the most recent school staffing data currently and publicly available from the California Department of Education. Data for total enrollment and students with disabilities in California public schools from 2022–23, the most recent available at time of analysis. Data on students with disabilities is only available for 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years. Due to limitations in data availability, we cannot calculate provider–student ratios in any single year. Therefore, the ratios here are only estimates using the best and most recent data available. Although the counts of students and providers are from different years, we would not expect large shifts for either

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- 2** There is no state-level accounting of the total number of SLPs who are serving California public school students, but employed by and working through contract agencies. However, interviews with CSHA leaders, county and regional SELPA directors, and SLPs indicates this is common practice.

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- 3** Author’s calculations based on publicly available data from the California Department of Education. Specifically, the *Special Education Downloadable Data Files, 2022–23*.

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- 4** Per CCR Title 5, §3030 Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction.

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- 5** National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Students With Disabilities. Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>

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- 6** Average caseload based on results from survey of California school-based SLPs (n=1233) administered by California Speech Hearing Association in Spring 2024.

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- 7** Average caseload based on results from survey of California school-based SLPs serving only preschool students (n=125) administered by California Speech Hearing Association in Spring 2024.

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- 8** American Speech–Language–Hearing Association. (2024). *Survey summary, speech language pathologists*. ASHA 2024 Schools Survey. Retrieved December 6, 2024 from: [https://www.asha.org/research/memberdata/schools-survey/?srsltid=AfmBOoQqaf6Q8mO7oKUV\\_Bpx7ig9RE6UQcEtzA1ALZMUPY27b2dhqChN](https://www.asha.org/research/memberdata/schools-survey/?srsltid=AfmBOoQqaf6Q8mO7oKUV_Bpx7ig9RE6UQcEtzA1ALZMUPY27b2dhqChN)

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- 9** Based on results from survey of California school-based SLPs serving only preschool students (n=1058) administered by California Speech Hearing Association in Spring 2024.

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- 10** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.

## ENDNOTES (cont.)

- 11** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.  
AND Cirrin, F., Bird, A., Biehl, L., Disney, S., Estomin, E., Rudebusch, J., ... & Whitmire, K. (2003).  
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- 12** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.  
AND Green, L., Chance, P., & Stockholm, M. (2019). Implementation and perceptions of  
classroom-based service delivery: A survey of public school clinicians. *Language, Speech, and  
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- 13** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.
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- 14** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.
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- 15** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.
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- 16** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.  
AND Marante, L., Hall-Mills, S., & Farquharson, K. (2023). School-based speech-language  
pathologists' stress and burnout: A cross-sectional survey at the height of the COVID-19  
pandemic. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 54(2), 456-471.
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- 17** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.  
AND Katz, L. A., Maag, A., Fallon, K. A., Blenkarn, K., & Smith, M. K. (2010). What makes a caseload  
(un) manageable? School-based speech-language pathologists speak; Woltmann, J., &  
Camron, S. C. (2009). Use of workload analysis for caseload establishment in the recruitment  
and retention of school-based speech-language pathologists. *Journal of Disability Policy  
Studies*, 20(3), 178-183.
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- 18** Based on interviews of SLPs and SELPA directors conducted by the author in November 2024.  
AND Katz, L. A., Maag, A., Fallon, K. A., Blenkarn, K., & Smith, M. K. (2010). What makes a caseload  
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Camron, S. C. (2009). Use of workload analysis for caseload establishment in the recruitment  
and retention of school-based speech-language pathologists. *Journal of Disability Policy  
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