

# Great Ways to Start the New School Year

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Once again, the start of a new school year is right around the corner! After a few weeks of rest and relaxation, our hope is that the school speech-language pathologist (SLP) is starting to look forward to another rewarding year of positively impacting the lives of children. While the SLP may work in a variety of job settings, choosing to work in the public school setting can be one of the most fulfilling places of employment. We acknowledge that some of you are faced with high caseloads and being expected to be an expert in all areas of communication disorders; however, our goal is to challenge you to analyze HOW you “do speech.” Are there things that you, as an individual SLP or as a school district, can do differently in order to take the speech therapy services to the next level of excellence? As you reflect on your particular situation and circumstances, we would like share some ideas and practices that have been implemented in Pasadena ISD (Houston area).

**1. Child Focused:** First and foremost, in our minds and district, the child is center focus. Meeting the needs of the individual child should be the driving force behind the educational system. Adult agendas and selfishness need to be set aside. This is not to say that it is the SLP’s sole responsibility to meet all of the needs of the child. However, SLPs have a vital role among the school staff as they consider the various roles, responsibilities, and training of the educational staff. SLPs are notorious for taking on the responsibility of “saving” all of the children. As you think about your school, we challenge you to seriously examine who you are serving and how you are serving them.

**2. Eligibility:** Clearly defined eligibility criteria are needed and necessary! The school SLP needs to be serving those children who truly have a speech impairment. According to federal law, a speech or language impairment means a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term “adverse effect on educational performance” includes not only academic performance but the functional performance of the child. One must ask how a child’s communication disorder impacts him/her academically or functionally. Or does it?

**3. Response to Intervention (RtI):** When the federal law Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was revised in 2004, great emphasis was placed on providing intervention to students prior to referral to special education (including speech therapy). Providing intervention and measuring how or if a child responded to the intervention is valuable data to consider prior to looking for an impairment. RtI has been exciting in Pasadena ISD. We have been able to provide articulation intervention to many students who may or may not have met the eligibility criteria as being speech impaired. Our rosters of speech impaired students now reflect very few “traditional artic” kids. For more information on the Artic Lab concept, you may contact the authors or obtain the program through Super Duper, Inc.

**4. Workload:** How we serve children can make or break the school SLP. The “one size fits all” methodology does not work! The individual needs of the speech impaired child should to be reflected in the SLP’s weekly schedule. We challenge you to look at your caseload from a workload approach. There is much more involved in meeting the speech needs of a child than just the amount of direct therapy provided to the child. In order to provide the direct speech therapy and the indirect speech therapy services that many children need, Pasadena ISD implemented a flexible scheduling model known as a “3:1 model.” Using this model, the SLPs provide direct speech therapy services to students for 3 weeks. Then, during the 4th week, they focus on indirect services on behalf of students, such as classroom observations; admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) meetings; testing; report writing; classroom engineering for communication supports; material development; and staff development training.

**5. Location, Location, Location:** Challenge yourself to “get out of the speech closet” and do therapy in a more naturalistic setting. Research repeatedly supports the provision of speech therapy in a natural language environment. As a starting point, give thought to conducting language therapy in the classroom. Not only are there benefits to the student(s) on your roster, but the teacher sees and hears you doing therapy. The teacher can then use the strategies with her/his entire class.

**6. Support Network:** Building a network of support from other professionals is also a critical component. Within the school setting, we encourage you to schedule time in your week to team with the other professionals on your campus and with other SLPs in your district. A simple idea implemented in Pasadena was the cluster concept. Each SLP was assigned to a cluster or “family” of SLPs. This gives each SLP a network of expertise s/he can tap into to brainstorm on difficult cases.

**7. Clerical Support:** There are many things that school speech-language pathologists do that can be done by a clerk. Providing part-time clerical support for the SLP has helped to keep the SLPs focused on duties that require their expertise. This has proven to be a cost effective way to address the shortage of SLPs in the school setting.

There are many other ways you can work smarter rather than harder. Hopefully we have given you some food for thought to get ideas flowing. We hope you have a wonderful year meeting the needs of students!

## Questions about your Texas State License?

For any questions related to your Texas State license or license renewal for speech-language pathology and/or audiology, you must contact the State Board of Examiners for Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology at 512-834-6627 or online at [www.dshs.state.tx.us/speech](http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/speech).