SPEECH ASSISTANTS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The requirements for the issuance of an authorization for speech assistants are defined in West Virginia Board of Education Policy 5202, “Minimum Requirements for the Licensure of Professional/Paraprofessional Personnel and Advanced Salary.” Policy 5202 becomes effective on June 18, 2003.

Is there a need for speech assistants?
Yes. The intent of this policy is to address the shortage of certified speech-language pathologists in West Virginia and better serve students with communication disorders by ensuring that personnel providing services are supervised and executing those tasks only within their scope of responsibilities and training.

Who are speech assistants?
Speech assistants are individuals who may provide services to students with communication disorders under the guidance and direction of a certified speech-language pathologist. School systems frequently use the services of certified occupational therapy assistants (COTAs) and physical therapy assistants (PTAs) to facilitate the provision of therapy to students with disabilities. The speech assistant will serve a similar role in the provision of services to students with communication disorders. These individuals must be issued an authorization from the West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Professional Preparation, according to the rules outlined in Policy 5202.

What responsibilities are within the role of the speech assistant?
Speech assistants may conduct specific components of a speech and language delivery program as specified in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) under the direction and guidance of a certified speech-language pathologist. Tasks executed by speech assistants must be within their scope of responsibilities and include only those tasks they have the expertise and training to perform. Responsibilities may include the following:

- conducting speech-language screenings;
- providing services to students according to the IEP;
- documenting student progress toward his/her goals and objectives;
- assisting with individual assessments;
- performing checks and maintenance of equipment;
- assisting in the implementation of assistive technology devices and services; and
- other appropriate tasks as assigned.
Will speech assistants be used to replace speech-language pathologists?
No. Assistants cannot replace qualified speech-language pathologists. Speech assistants may only be used when a certified speech-language pathologist has not applied for the available position as documented by the county and verified by the county superintendent. The use of speech assistants does not preclude the active recruitment of certified speech-language pathologists.

Who may supervise a speech assistant?
The speech assistant must be under the direction and guidance of a fully certified speech-language pathologist who has practiced speech-language pathology at least 2 years following certification.

How much supervision is required?
The amount and type of supervision required should be based on the skills and experience of the speech assistant, the needs of the individuals served, the service setting, the tasks assigned and other factors. A supervision plan must outline procedures for direct and indirect supervision of the speech assistant including documentation requirements. Direct supervision means on-site, in-view observation and guidance during a therapy session. Indirect supervision may include demonstration, record review, review and evaluation of audio or videotaped sessions, or supervisory conferences conducted by e-mail or telephone.

What are the requirements for an authorization?
The applicant must:
   A. hold a minimum of a bachelor’s degree in speech pathology or communication disorders from an accredited institution;
   B. be employed by a local West Virginia Board of Education; and
   C. receive the recommendation of the district superintendent verifying that the applicant is the most qualified candidate for the position and that no fully certified speech-language pathologist has applied for the available position.

How long will an authorization be in effect?
An authorization is valid for one school year and expires on June 30th of each year.

How is an authorization renewed?
In order to renew the authorization, the applicant must complete professional development activities and receive the recommendation of the district superintendent verifying that no fully certified speech-language pathologist has applied for the available position.
Will speech assistants be assigned a caseload?
Yes. The speech assistant will be assigned a caseload based on their level of expertise, experience, and supervision requirements. The caseload of the certified speech-language pathologist working with the speech assistant should be adjusted to provide adequate time for supervision.

Will the use of speech assistants affect Medicaid billing for speech-language services?
Yes. Services provided by a speech assistant are not an allowable expenditure for Medicaid reimbursement.

The West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Special Education, will disseminate a guidance document detailing regulations for the use of speech assistants in West Virginia schools. Additional questions may be directed to Kathy Knighton (kknighto@access.k12.wv.us), Office of Special Education, (304) 558-2696 or 1-800-642-8541.

West Virginia Department of Education