



A New Grad's Guide to Landing Your School-Based Therapy Job



Congratulations, Graduate! ... What's Next?

With your degree in hand and the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance” still ringing in your ears, you’re about to begin what we hope will be a very long and satisfying career as a therapist.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the number of jobs in multiple therapeutic disciplines and settings are expected to grow faster or even much faster than average through 2026.

Jobs in physical and occupational therapy, in particular, are on the BLS’ list of the nation’s [20 fastest growing occupations](#). U.S. News and

World Report even ranked being an occupational therapist [the 11th best job in the country](#).

There’s no doubt America’s aging baby boomers are driving a lot of the growing demand for therapy services. But this demographic reality doesn’t mean you’ll spend your whole career working with older adults in hospitals and rehabilitation clinics, private homes, or senior living facilities—or that you’ll ever have to, if that’s not where your strengths and interests are. Other populations need your services, too, including one at the opposite end of the chronological spectrum: the children and young adults in America’s schools.

A Distinct Sense of Satisfaction

Research suggests clinicians in school-based therapy jobs feel a distinct sense of satisfaction with their work. Here's a sample of what some surveys and studies published in the last two decades have revealed:

- Among [school-based OTs](#), 95.4% rank their job satisfaction as “good” or better, compared with 66.6% of their non-school-based counterparts. Only 4.7% ranked it “fair” or below, compared with 31.5% of non-school OTs. Client interaction topped the list of reasons school-based OTs felt so satisfied; 88.4% of respondents ranked it #1, higher than the 79.6% of non-school-based OTs who did so.
- The [majority of school-based PTs](#) also report job satisfaction, thanks to “opportunity for social service, job security, creativity, flexibility, autonomy, and the opportunity to work with children and to see them succeed.”
- Most [SLPs in public schools](#), too, feel good about what they do: 42.2% say they’re “generally satisfied,” and 34.1% say they’re “highly satisfied.” They count varied and interesting

work, interacting with students, flexibility, continual learning, and making a difference among their jobs’ most positive aspects.

Will every day as a school-based therapist feel like a win? Of course not. But for any therapist leaving the university classroom to go and do more good in the world, few destinations offer as many and as powerful opportunities as the school classroom does.



What You'll Find Inside

At [Pediatric Therapeutic Services \(PTS\)](#), we help therapists, including new practitioners like you, achieve success in school-based therapy jobs. We equip them with tools to build careers in which they not only empower students but also grow as skilled clinicians.

In school districts throughout southeastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, PTS is doing more than simply filling staffing gaps in special education programs. We're nurturing a network of nearly 400 independent therapists so they can provide effective related services to students and contribute new solutions to the wider therapeutic community.

As part of our commitment to nurturing excellent school-based therapists, we've put together this brief guide to landing and starting an entry-level school-based therapy job on the strongest possible footing.

Inside, you'll find out...

- What you need to consider when choosing to work as a school employee or an independent contractor.
- What kind of background checks and clearances you'll need to practice therapy in schools.
- What you should (and shouldn't) do before, during, and after your job interview.

What to look for when deciding whether the position you've been offered is a good match for you.

It's our hope this guide will make your entry into school-based therapy a little easier.

We think it's a wonderful field to be in, and we welcome you to it!

A Special Note to the Class of **2020**

You're the first class of therapy graduates who'll be reading this eBook, and you'd be right to think less of us if we didn't acknowledge you are graduating into an unprecedented time of uncertainty. "Disruption" seems too weak a word for what the COVID-19 pandemic has done to education—not only the final few months of your graduate education but also the school routines of hundreds of thousands of America's students.

The outbreak and resulting school closures are also, as of this writing, proving especially challenging for students who need special education and related services. From the challenges of delivering services via teletherapy to concerns that proposed waivers of federal special education laws will hurt students with special needs in a lasting way, the present and future U.S. educational landscape remains unclear.

Whatever "new normal" awaits America's students, they'll be coping with the trauma of a violently upended routine and an ongoing public health crisis as they adapt to it. The need for school-based therapists who can deliver trauma-informed care will continue to be great. And we're confident your class will do a great job meeting it.

Your job search won't be "business as usual," but we think the principles, suggestions, and tips we've included in this eBook can still help you as you enter the field at a critically important time. We are especially glad to have you with us!

Choosing to Work as an Employee or an Independent Contractor

The high demand for special education and related services means your chances to help students with disabilities and disorders are plentiful. But a chronic lack of special ed funding means more districts are spending less on it, and aren't hiring many therapist employees.

Fortunately, finding a job with a school district isn't your only option. You can also practice as an [independent contractor \(IC\)](#).

We can't tell you which employment status is best for you. You should always talk to tax and legal professionals about the impact each would have on you.

You may have to make the decision several times over the course of your career. The speech-language pathologist (SLP), say, who scores a job as a school employee this year may become a contracted speech therapist the next if the school board decides to tighten the district's purse strings.

But given special education's persistent budget crunch, we do believe working as an IC is an option more therapists should keep in mind.

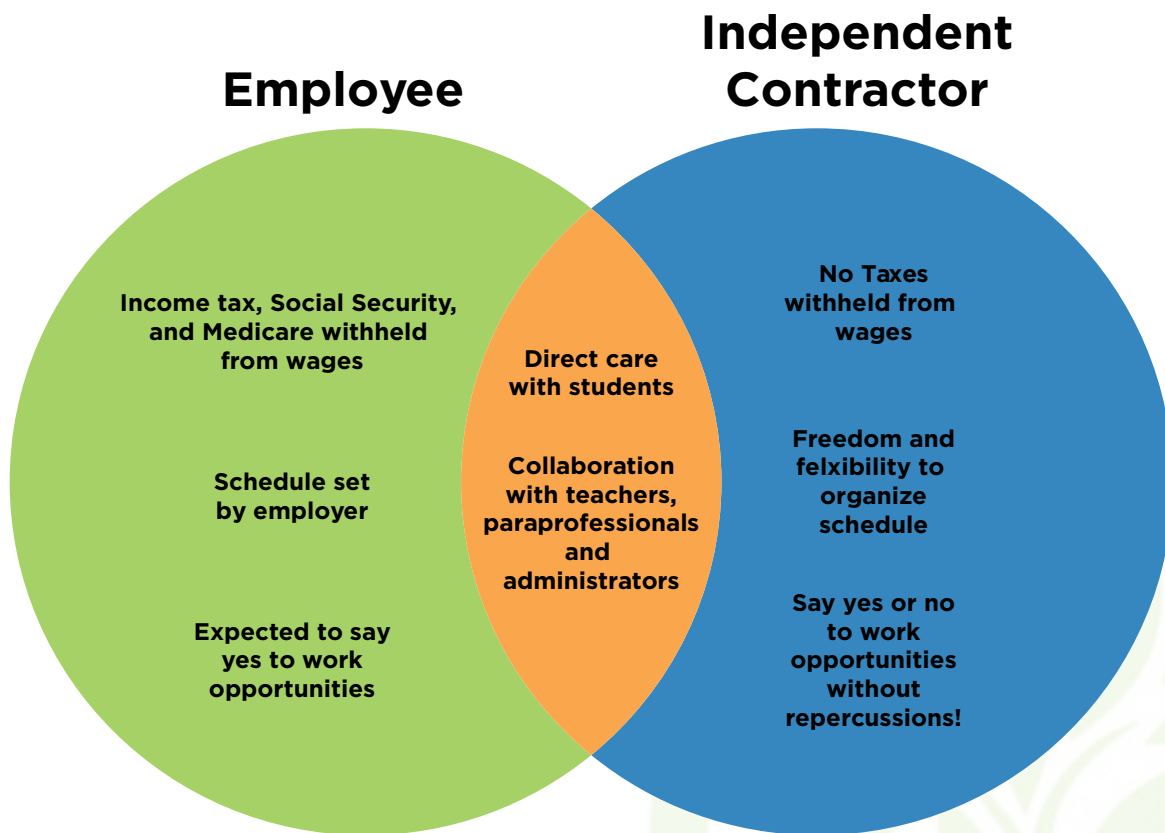
Here are five issues school employees and ICs experience differently you should keep in mind when making your decision:

1. Schedule Flexibility

School employees report to work on the schedule the school or district sets. Above and beyond the hours put in during the regular instructional day, they're often expected to attend meetings before and after school, as well as school-related extracurricular events.

ICs negotiate what days they work and for how long. You can build your work schedule around your own circumstances and personal preferences. You can set and bill for your own "off-hour" availability.

EMPLOYEE VS. INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR



Provided you show up when you've agreed to show up and successfully manage your caseload, your time is your own, enabling you to more easily strike a fulfilling work-life balance.

2. Take-Home Pay

School employees are subject to federal, state (in 43 of 50 cases), and local income tax withholding. Districts also take out their employees' social security tax and other deductions, such as the cost of participating in a health care or other benefit plan, before the

paycheck reaches the employee's bank account. These deductions may mean less stress when it's time to file taxes but they also definitely mean smaller take-home pay.

ICs bill the number of hours they work and take home the full rate of pay for those hours. A contracted therapist's rate vs. a school employee's is typically higher. ICs are still responsible for income, social security, and other taxes (check with a tax professional). They often end up paying their entire

health insurance cost, though you might work with a company that offers help. (For example, PTS connects you with an independent broker who can help secure sensible policies to fit your budget.)

When you conscientiously manage your money, bigger take-home pay can improve your quality of living.



3. Business Expenses

School employees should have the materials they need to do their work supplied (though we've all heard news stories about public school teachers and therapists stocking their classrooms out of their own pocket—94% of them do). Employees can't deduct associated expenses like their professional wardrobe

or commuting costs; these are simply the costs of having the job.

ICs must buy the specialized tools and equipment they need unless the building or district already happens to own them. The good news is they can usually write off that spending—along with a professional wardrobe, commuting costs, and others—as business expenses at tax time (always consulting a tax professional before doing so).

(Here at PTS, our extensive lending [library of testing resources](#) goes a long way toward making sure clinicians have commonly used but frequently expensive evaluations, assessments, and other tools of the trade.)

4. Benefits and Time Off

School employees receive benefit packages as part of their compensation. Benefits can include health insurance, vision and dental insurance, retirement plans, as well as paid time off and sick leave. Contrary to common misunderstanding, public school teachers aren't "paid to do nothing" over the summer; most districts distribute the salary teachers earn over 12 months. But many school employees do think those three months away from the classroom are a perk!



ICs must get their own medical and professional liability insurance (again, when you're working with PTS, we'll connect you with an independent broker who'll find your best options). You're only paid for the hours and days you work, document, and bill. If you want the summer off to pursue other opportunities or simply to soak up some sun, it's yours! But you can also make extra money providing therapy in [Extended School Year \(ESY\) programs](#).

5. Organization with Other Professionals

Therapists often pay union dues so they can enjoy such benefits as collective bargaining power, discount programs, life insurance benefits, and so on.

ICs pay association dues, not union dues. Association benefits might include discount programs, liability insurance, and professional development, but usually not collective leverage at a bargaining table—you are, after all, an independent contractor, and must be your own best advocate.

(Fortunately, when you work with PTS, you can always count on us to be in your corner!)



Getting the Clearances School-Based Therapists Need

Whether you're working as an employee or an IC, because you'll be having direct contact with students, you'll need to undergo background checks and get security clearances.

Since you almost certainly needed and obtained clearances to do your fieldwork, this requirement shouldn't surprise you. But no national background check standards yet exist for classroom teachers, let alone school-based therapists, as USA Today made clear in [a much-discussed 2016 report](#). Make sure you get accurate, up-to-date information about clearance requirements in the state(s) where you want to practice and, whenever possible, take the initiative in meeting them.

And don't forget: Individual school districts may require additional forms and clearances. For example, most districts now require an updated physical examination and a tuberculosis (TB) test. Clear communication with the district or the agency you're working with is crucial. You don't want missing or incomplete paperwork to cause a bumpy start to your new job!

Here's some information (accurate as of May 2020) about required clearances in the three states where PTS clinicians most often work.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania requires individuals working in public and private schools to complete three background checks:

- **Department of Human Services [Child Abuse History Clearance](#)**
- Submit, pay for, and receive results online; or use a paper application. Be sure to indicate “School Employee Governed by the Public School” as your Purpose of Clearance.
- **Pennsylvania State Police [Request for Criminal Records Check](#)** -
Submit, pay for, and receive results online; or use a paper application. Be sure to indicate “Employment” as your Reason for Request.
- **[Federal Criminal History Record Information \(CHRI\)](#)** - Register online or by phone, then visit a fingerprinting facility for this FBI, fingerprint-based background check.

You are responsible for obtaining your background checks and clearances, and for submitting all results to your prospective employer.

You'll need to renew your clearances every 60 months, at minimum, from the

date of the oldest clearance. Employer or licensure requirements may mandate more frequent updates.

- Pennsylvania further requires:
- Licensure for OTs, PTs, COTAs, ASHA-Certified SLPs, and Nurses
- PA Dept. of Education Certificate (for SLPs & Psychologists only)
- First Aid and CPR Cards (Nurses only)
- Malpractice insurance carried and paid for by the clinician (if you acquire yours through [Healthcare Providers Service Organization \(HSPO\)](#), you'll also need to provide Proof of Payment)
- Act 24 - Arrest/Conviction Report and Certification Form
- Act 126 - Child Abuse Recognition and Reporting Training
- Act 168 - Sexual Misconduct/Abuse Discloser Release Form
- [Food Allergy and Epi-Pen Certification](#)
- Tuberculosis Test and Physician Examination Results (dated within one year of your hire date)

For more information:

<http://www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov/resources/clearances/index.htm>

New Jersey

Working through the New Jersey State Police and the FBI, New Jersey's Office of Student Protection Unit conducts criminal background checks of anyone applying to work in a public or private school. As a new or recent grad, you'll most likely need to complete the [New Applicant Request](#), but be aware of two other versions (Archive Applicant Requests and Transfer Applicant Requests), and choose the appropriate one.

After you apply and pay, you'll need to print your [IdentoGO N.J. Universal Fingerprint Form](#) and schedule a fingerprinting appointment (use the link on your confirmation page or call 1-877-503-5981).

You are responsible for obtaining and paying for your background check. Your employer is ultimately responsible for ensuring you have completed the process. The state Department of Education will simultaneously notify applicants and employers if an applicant is disqualified or ineligible.

Approvals only remain valid as long as you work in the district where hired, or for the contractor who hired you. If a new job takes you elsewhere in New Jersey, you'll need a new background check.

For more information:

<https://www.nj.gov/education/crimhist/>

Delaware

In Delaware, anyone seeking employment in public or private schools who will have direct access to children must complete fingerprinted state and national background checks [through the State Bureau of Investigation \(SBI\)](#), as well as a [Child Protection Registry background check](#) through Delaware Services for Children, Youth and Their Families (DSCYF). The SBI provides the criminal background report and DSCYF the Child Protection Registry report to both applicant and employer.

You are responsible for obtaining and paying for your background check, although public schools may bear the cost, provided they don't use state funds.

Delaware further requires:

- Liability Insurance
- TB/PPD Test Results

- Delaware Business License
- Sexual Harassment Training Certificate

Private schools in Delaware have some additional options. They may perform a name-based Delaware criminal background check through the Delaware Justice Information System and an out-of-state criminal record check through private, third-party providers. (These checks are valid for five years.) Or they may opt-out of the background check requirement altogether—provided they get signed acknowledgments from parents and guardians that the school “is not meeting minimum background check safety requirements for its staff members.”

For more information:

<https://codes.findlaw.com/de/title-31-welfare/de-code-sect-31-309.html>

Working as an Independent Contractor (IC)?

If you're working as an IC, you'll also need to be able to provide schools with a copy of your contract with your agency (such as PTS), and you'll need to fill out an [IRS Form W-9](#), “Request for Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification.” While schools and

agencies don't file the W-9 with the IRS, they need the information on it (namely, your Tax ID number) to report your earnings to the IRS on the Form 1099-MISC.

Speaking of your earnings, some districts or agencies (again, including PTS) will require you to fill out a Direct Deposit form. (Who wants to mess with paper paychecks anymore anyway, right?)

It's all a lot of paperwork! Just bear in mind, when the hassle's causing you a headache: Clearances are all about keeping kids safe... and the tax forms are about making sure you get paid what you've earned!



Acing Your School-Based Therapy Job Interview

In some ways, interviewing for a school-based therapy position is like interviewing for any other job.

Your task is to authentically and convincingly present yourself as the best qualified, most logical candidate for the job. You need to “package” your education and experience, your practical skills, your ability to shoulder responsibility and solve problems, and your passion for working with students together in such a way that the school, school district, or service agency sees you as the person they’ve been looking for all along.

Just that simple, right?

When you’re interviewing, don’t forget to take all the good job interview advice you’ve ever heard. Just filter it through the unique nature of our profession.

Unlike a lot of other jobs, your commitment here isn’t to stockholders or a profitable bottom line (although, special education funding being what it is, you’ll want to highlight your efficiency and what you can do with limited resources). Your commitment is to kids with disabilities and disorders, and your interview should reflect it.

Here are a few of our top tips for acing your school-based therapy job interview.

Before Your Interview

- **Research the school/district or service agency and prepare questions of your own.**

In this “information age,” you’ve got no excuse for ignorance about the school, district, or agency where you’re applying. Get Googling!

What are the demographic trends in the school or district? What progress has it recently made—or what problems has it recently faced?

If you’re applying to a company, find and study its mission statement. Know the services it offers. Find out about its community engagement.

All your research will pay off at the interview’s end when you’re asked, “So, do you have any questions for us?” Never answer, “No!” Asking informed, intelligent questions not only shows you’re truly interested but also lets you “plant some seeds” about how you’d make positive contributions on the job.

- **Anticipate the interviewer’s questions.**

Researching the school/district or agency beforehand will allow you to look over your CV and application through your prospective employer’s eyes.

Knowing what you now know about them, what unique features of your coursework and fieldwork experience do you think might grab their attention or spark their interest? Are there gaps or irregularities you should be ready to explain?

You’ll also want to research the kinds of questions—including “stumpers”—that come up most frequently in interviews in your particular discipline. (For example, AOTA offers the [Best Answers to the 11 Most Difficult Interview Questions](#) OTs get asked.)

You’ll feel more comfortable if you’ve prepared for possible questions and have practiced your responses. Don’t memorize “canned” answers, but do think through some “talking points” you can use as needed.

- **Dress the part so you'll present well.**

Always make sure your physical appearance is on par with the occasion. Showing up to a job interview wearing what you'd wear to hang out with your friends on the weekend isn't appropriate.

You should always wear business professional attire for in-person or virtual interviews. Even if you're interviewing over the phone, dress up. Your wardrobe affects your mindset—if you're dressed professionally, the odds are better you'll sound professional!

During Your Interview

- **Show up on time, focused on your interviewers.**

Whether you're interviewing in person or remotely (many agencies, including PTS, use screening calls as the first step in the interview process), respect your interviewers' schedule by being ready at the scheduled time.

If you're interviewing on-site, arrive ahead of time—not ridiculously early, but enough to signal you're taking the interview seriously.

If you're interviewing by phone or video conference, make sure you're ready to take the call. Answer in a quiet environment. If you're on

camera, use a plain and distraction-free background.

Whether you're ready to start on time and give the conversation your full attention will show interviewers whether you're a professional who's serious about the position.

- **Be engaged and engaging.**

Practice active listening. Give the interviewer time to talk, and don't interrupt.

When you do talk, make the interviewer feel they want to take the next steps with you because you sound like a candidate eager to learn more about the school, district, or company, and get a position in school-based practice.

- **Answer all questions accurately and in adequate detail.**

Most schools, districts, and agencies will be impressed by candidates who provide detailed responses to questions. Certainly, we at PTS are. Short "yes" and "no" answers aren't usually acceptable, and we may ask you to elaborate. We want passionate candidates ready to talk about the experiences that led them to where they are today.



And though you might feel tempted to tell interviewers what you think they want to hear—after all, a job is on the line—be pleasantly honest and frank.

For example, telling an interviewer you're open to a part-time position when you know you only want a full-time therapy job isn't accurate. If the interviewer presents you with a part-time opportunity down the road and you decline, you may appear as though you're not sure what you want in a position.

After Your Interview

- **Follow up within 24 hours.**
Send an email or handwritten “thank you” note to the person who interviewed you in which you reiterate your interest in the position. If you forgot to mention any important details during the interview, the note allows you the opportunity to add them.
- **Don't assume the job's a done deal.**
No matter how well you think the interview went, remember: You're almost certainly not the only candidate being considered for the position, and you don't know your competition. Once you send that thank-you note, move on to getting ready for your next interview.

If you don't have a "next interview" lined up, fix that ASAP! Better to be interrupted by a job offer from one school, district, or agency while researching another than to pin all your hopes on a single position



Deciding Whether a Job is Right for You

You've decided whether you'll practice as an employee or an IC. You've applied for your necessary clearances. You've put your best foot forward in your interview.

And now you've been offered a position—congratulations!

But before you say yes, take some time to decide whether the job is a good fit. Read your contract thoroughly, whether you're considering a contract or full time employment position. Make sure the terms are clear. If you don't, you run the risk of setting yourself up for professional frustration and personal unhappiness your paycheck won't be able to make go away.

So what should you be looking for in your first school-based therapy position?

The [American Occupational Therapy Association](#) (AOTA) advises new OT graduates to ask themselves questions like the ones below as they search for their first job. We think there's wisdom here for practitioners in any therapeutic discipline:

- Does the practice setting make you feel good about your work and that you're making a positive difference?
- Will you have opportunities for mentorship and teamwork that will help you gain confidence and grow as a clinician?
- Will your job allow you to balance your work, life, and play in healthy ways?

In addition, consider these three factors we consider especially important:

- **Orientation to the educational setting.**
Practicing therapy in schools is much different from practicing in a medical, rehabilitative, long-term care, or another clinical setting. And while you'll inevitably have to learn a lot about those differences on the job, an ideal first job will include structured opportunities to explore what makes school-based therapy unique.

At PTS, our [School-Based Academy](#) serves that purpose. This intensive one-day workshop covers such critical topics as:

- Building mutually beneficial relationships with teachers, staff, and parents.
- Writing relevant, realistic, student-focused IEP goals.
- Utilize Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Response to Intervention & Instruction (MTSS-RtII).
- Collecting, analyzing, and reporting observational data.
- Fighting “caseload creep” and crafting an efficient schedule.
- **On-site supervision, support, and mentorship.**
All too often, school-based therapists report feeling isolated from the rest of the school building community, especially if they’re moving from site to site and end up doing most of their work in the proverbial “special ed room.” [Knowing how to connect with teachers, administrators, and other school staff](#) can counteract this isolation. So can having on-site supervision and support.

At PTS, our Clinical Directors provide our therapists guidance, counseling, and a shoulder to lean on. Each of them has been in your shoes. Combined, they have more than 115 years of experience providing therapy in a school setting! They’ve also all been ICs, and can offer first-hand wisdom on handling yourself as a business.

When you need another pair of eyes, literally, on a particular student or classroom, or in-person modeling of how to handle a situation, your Clinical Director is your professional mentor and dedicated advocate supervising and supporting you on-site and never more than a phone call away

- **Readily available resources to use with your students.**

The evaluations school-based therapists use with students are specialized and often expensive. If you’re working as an IC, you can likely write off these costs as business expenses at tax time (consult your accountant), but wouldn’t it be nicer not to have to pay in the first place? Find out what resources the position you’re considering already has in place to facilitate your work.

At PTS, we maintain an up-to-date lending library of evaluations, assessments, test forms (at cost, in the individual amount you need), and other school-based therapy resources for our clinicians' use. Simply fill out a request form online, and we'll ship what you need directly to you or have it ready for pick up. Think of the time and money you'll save not hunting down and buying multiple materials!

We also offer additional, practical resources online, from schedule forms to data collection forms.





Supporting Your Success As You Support Your Students

PTS' commitment to providing students the best-related services possible means we're committed to helping independent school-based therapists become the best clinicians they can be.

We find the best independent clinicians we can, then do everything possible, at every stage—from hiring to year-to-year transitions, to career advancement—to help them become even better.

Schools are unique and frequently challenging settings for providing therapy. And it's not easy to take the risk and initiative required to establish

yourself as your own therapy business.

But if you're ready to explore the benefits of turning a school-based therapy job into a business all your own, you don't have to go it alone! We urge you to consider joining our team. [Explore the positions we currently have available](#) or send us an email: joinus@mypts.com.



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