

NEW JERSEY CHARTER SCHOOLS

Why Special Educators Leave and How Leaders Can Keep Them

A Guide for Principals and System Leaders



Mission

We are committed to catalyzing student success and eradicating the complex, pervasive, and systematic barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing quality educational opportunities and choices, robust support, and inclusive environments.

The Center for Learner Equity is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that students with disabilities have equitable access to a high-quality public education. CLE provides research, policy analysis, coalition building, and technical assistance to a variety of stakeholders across the nation.

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ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This toolkit provides New Jersey charter school leaders with strategies to use RIGHT NOW to RETAIN special educators.

- Do you find yourself in a tiring, yearly cycle of having to hire new special education teachers?
- Do you want to better understand the causes of special education teacher attrition and what you can do to support retention?
- Are you a school or CMO leader who wants to take action to retain your special education teachers?

If you answered “yes” to any of the questions above, then you’re in the right place!

This guide is not about creating a talent pipeline or addressing shortages. Rather, it focuses on retaining your current special education teachers so that you do not need to hire more people! If you are looking for more long-term, systemic strategies, we recommend that you explore the CEEDAR Center’s [*Educator Shortages in Special Education: Toolkit for Developing Local Strategies.*](#)



Why Focus On Retention?

Special Educators Need Special Strategies: Why Don't Generic Retention Strategies Work for Special Educators?

Teacher retention is a bigger challenge in special education than in other teaching roles. Special education has long faced severe and chronic staffing shortages.¹ As of March 2024, over half of all public schools nationally needed to fill special education positions.² New Jersey will need 2,500 additional special education teachers over the next five years according to the NJ Education Association.³

Special educators aren't leaving teaching; they're leaving their roles.

Special education teachers are not leaving the teaching profession. Rather, credentialed special educators are teaching in non-special education roles.⁴ The burnout crisis in special education isn't random. Research reveals the real culprits. The role of the special educator is distinct from other teaching roles. Special education teachers face unique challenges, and they burn out for different reasons than other teachers. If school leaders can better understand the root causes of why special educators leave their jobs, then they can take action now to help these teachers stay.

If school leaders can better understand the root causes of why special educators leave their jobs, then they can take action now to help these teachers stay.

Why Are Special Educators Leaving?

The research on special education attrition is clear. There are five leading reasons why special educators leave their roles.

ROOT CAUSE #1

The Heavy Load: Volume and Type of Professional Demands

ROOT CAUSE #2

The Colleague Connection: It Takes a Village (But the Village Isn't Always Helping)

ROOT CAUSE #3

Professional Isolation: Surrounded by People, Yet Standing Alone

ROOT CAUSE #4

Leadership Letdown: The Support Special Educators Aren't Getting

ROOT CAUSE #5

The Pandemic's Lasting Damage: School Safety and Student Behavior

However, these root causes do not operate in isolation; more often than not, it is a combination of factors that impact an individual educator.

THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER BURNOUT: IT'S NOT ABOUT THE STUDENTS.

Park and Shin's comprehensive meta-analysis of 41 studies spanning 35 years revealed a counterintuitive finding—no student-related factors consistently predicted special educator attrition.⁵ This research dismantles the common assumption that challenging student behaviors or diverse learning needs drive teachers away. The real culprit (described in the root causes below) is an educational system and support structures that are not inclusive of special educators' unique roles.

The Heavy Load: The Volume and Type of Professional Demands

To understand this root cause, you first need to understand that the job of a special educator is different from the other roles in your school.

How is the job of a special educator different from other teaching roles?

→ **INCREASED TEACHING COMPLEXITY:** Many special educators work across multiple content areas and multiple grades. They are also responsible for supporting students with a wider range of learner profiles.

EXAMPLE: A special educator starts her day co-teaching 3rd grade math, then moves to 5th grade ELA, and finishes with 4th grade science. In one classroom, she supports a student with ADHD who needs movement breaks, another with dyslexia requiring phonetic supports, and a third with autism who processes information visually. She must master content across multiple grade levels while adapting her teaching approach for each student's unique needs.

→ **COMPLIANCE COMMITMENTS:** Special educator caseloads and paperwork demands vary greatly; however, all special educators play some role in drafting portions of Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs), managing IEP progress reports, collecting data, and facilitating IEP meetings. These compliance demands come in addition to special educators' core teaching responsibilities.

EXAMPLE: During a school's March-May IEP season, a special educator with 25 students on her caseload must write detailed progress reports for each student's goals, collect and analyze data on reading fluency and behavior interventions, and attend 25 annual review meetings with parents and teams. This adds 40+ hours of compliance work on top of her daily teaching, planning, and grading responsibilities.

→ **INCREASED CURRICULUM MODIFICATION:** Many Tier 1 curricular resources are not designed for a wide range of learners. As a result, special educators need time to modify, internalize and prepare instructional materials.

EXAMPLE: A 7th grade special educator is preparing for a science unit on ecosystems. The general education curriculum includes a complex eight-page reading passage about food webs with dense scientific vocabulary. For her students with reading disabilities, she needs to create a three-page version with visual diagrams and highlighted key terms. For students with autism who struggle with abstract concepts, she develops hands-on activities using physical models of predator-prey relationships. For a student with severe cognitive disabilities, she creates a picture-based matching activity that focuses on basic animal categorization. What would take a general education teacher 30 minutes to prep now requires 2-3 hours for the special educator, who must create multiple versions that meet each student's individual learning needs and IEP goals.

The Colleague Connection: It Takes a Village (But the Village Isn't Always Helping)

Effective special education is wholly interconnected with all other aspects of school programming, often requiring extensive collaboration with colleagues. As a result, the mindsets and behaviors of other educators can have an outsized impact on an individual special educator.

How can colleagues impact special educators' job satisfaction?

Effective special education involves all educators sharing collective responsibility for students with disabilities. Collaborative planning time, joint professional development, and shared problem-solving can create environments where teachers share ownership of student outcomes. When general educators understand compliance requirements that require special educators to step away from classrooms, they can provide collegial support and maintain collaborative partnerships.

Why do general educator relationships make or break special educator job satisfaction?

→ **FRAGMENTED RESPONSIBILITY:** All teachers are responsible for all students in their classrooms. When general educators offload responsibility to special educators by referring to “your students” and “my students” either explicitly, or by signalling this mindset with their actions, it can leave special educators feeling unsupported and siloed. In practice, this lack of collective responsibility can make it impossible for the special educator to be effective.

EXAMPLE: Mr. Bryant is a special educator who co-teaches social studies with Ms. Denet. One of the students with disabilities in this classroom has been consistently disruptive. Mr. Bryant knows this is because the lesson is delivered very quickly, verbally, with minimal visual supports. When Ms. Denet gets frustrated with the student's behavior, she says to Mr. Bryant, “You need to help the IEP kids stay on task.” However, when Mr. Bryant tries to make suggestions about lesson delivery, she is not open to feedback.

→ **ISOLATED PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION:** When general and special educators work in silos without shared planning time, collaborative lesson adaptation, or joint professional development, truly inclusive practices cannot develop. Special educators are left struggling to retrofit inaccessible instruction rather than co-creating effective learning experiences.

EXAMPLE: Ms. Bisson plans her 5th-grade math lessons independently and shares them with her co-teacher, Mr. Dugue, on morning of instruction. The lesson requires students to solve multi-step word problems by reading them silently and showing their work on blank paper. Mr. Dugue realizes that three students with disabilities will struggle with the reading level and lack of structure, but he has no time to collaborate on modifications. Instead, he scrambles to create simplified worksheets during the lesson, pulling these students aside while they miss the main instruction—creating exactly the kind of segregated learning experience they were trying to avoid.



→ **MISUNDERSTANDING SPECIAL EDUCATORS' DISTINCT PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES:** When general educators lack awareness of special educators' distinct role requirements—including mandatory IEP meetings, compliance deadlines, and specialized assessment accommodations—they may interpret necessary absences as disengagement or lack of commitment. This misunderstanding can strain collegial relationships and leave special educators feeling professionally isolated and unsupported in their complex dual responsibilities.

EXAMPLE: Ms. Allen is pulled from co-teaching 3rd-grade reading three times in one week for emergency compliance meetings requested by parents and advocates. Her general education partner, Mr. Dothan, comments to other teachers that she's "never around when we need her." He further suggests that she fails to prioritize classroom instruction. When Ms. Allen tries to explain the legal requirements, he responds that "we all have meetings," dismissing the specialized nature of her compliance duties, which leaves her feeling misunderstood and professionally devalued.

→ **COMMUNICATION BARRIERS STEMMING FROM SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE:** The technical nature of special education law, individualized programming, and specialized interventions creates an expertise gap that can isolate special educators from their general education colleagues. When special educators cannot easily translate complex requirements into accessible terms, or when general educators feel overwhelmed by the technical language, collaborative relationships suffer and special educators may feel professionally lonely.

EXAMPLE: During a team meeting about a struggling student, Ms. Jackson explains that the student needs "explicit phonemic awareness instruction using systematic, multisensory approaches aligned with their dyslexia profile, plus extended time accommodations per their Section 504 plan." Her general education colleagues exchange confused glances; one responds, "Can you just tell us what worksheet to give him?" The conversation shuts down, leaving Ms. Jackson feeling like her expertise is either incomprehensible or unwanted, while her colleagues feel excluded from decisions about their shared student.

Professional Isolation: Surrounded by People, Yet Standing Alone

Even when colleagues have positive mindsets toward collaborating, the role of a special educator can be isolating.

Why do special educators experience professional isolation?

- **FEWER COLLEAGUES DOING SIMILAR WORK:** Special educators represent a smaller portion of teaching staff compared to general educators, providing them with fewer opportunities to connect with colleagues in similar roles.⁶ This lack of community can increase their risk of leaving the profession.⁷
- **ACCESS TO SPECIAL EDUCATOR COLLEAGUES AND ASSOCIATED TRADEOFFS:** Special educators often face a structural dilemma in their collaborative time; they must choose between meeting with fellow special educators who understand their specialized role or collaborating with general education teachers who work with the same students. This can feel like a lose-lose decision that forces the special educator to choose between professional isolation or weakened collective responsibility for students. The challenge is compounded by the fact that special educators are often spread across multiple grade levels within a school, limiting their opportunities to share strategies, problem-solve, and collaborate with peers in similar roles. When they do have a meeting together, it frequently conflicts with general education team meetings, further reducing collaboration with general educators.
- **PHYSICAL SEPARATION:** Special educators frequently work across classrooms, resource rooms, or move between multiple locations throughout the day, reducing natural opportunities for collaboration and informal professional conversations. In the most concerning scenarios, special educators are relegated to spaces that are suboptimal for educating students (e.g., closets, basements, hallways) solely because they may have smaller group sizes. When this occurs, not only are special educators physically separated, they also receive a clear signal that they, and their students, are not valued.



Leadership Letdown: The Support Special Educators Aren't Getting

While school administrators impact the role of every educator within a school, when support from administrators is lacking, the impact on special educators is disproportionate.

What happens when principals don't "get" special education?

→ **PRINCIPALS MAY UNINTENTIONALLY SEND AN ALIENATING MESSAGE:**

Fewer than 18% of principals have direct experience with children with disabilities.⁸ Without this background, administrators may lack the instructional coaching strategies needed to support special educators—or may unintentionally say or do things that alienate them.

→ **ADMINISTRATORS FAIL TO PROVIDE ESSENTIAL SUPPORT:**

Research demonstrates that effective administrative support—encompassing instructional leadership, resource management, culture building, and recognition—significantly enhances teacher job satisfaction.⁹ When administrators fall short in any of these areas, it impacts educators' job satisfaction levels. In recent nationwide surveys (2020 and 2022) "ineffective support from administrators" was elevated as a key factor in attrition and a significant contributor to special educators' stress.^{10 11}

SCENARIO 1 • LACK OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: A principal observes a special education teacher working with a student with autism who is having significant behavioral difficulty. The principal says, "I noticed the student was quite disruptive during my observation. Have you considered implementing stronger classroom management techniques? Maybe a behavior chart would help."

WHY THIS IS ALIENATING: The suggestion shows limited knowledge, or possible misunderstanding of, autism and implies the teacher lacks basic classroom management skills that the teacher may be fluent in, or have already tried.

SCENARIO 2 • POOR RESOURCE ALLOCATION: A special educator's caseload grows from 12 to 20 students mid-year. However, the principal does not provide additional planning time, or seek additional staffing.

IMPACT: The special educator cannot provide quality individualized instruction and feels overwhelmed.

SCENARIO 3 • INADEQUATE CULTURE BUILDING: General educators complain during PD about how hard it is to teach with students with disabilities in their classes. The principal does not address these negative attitudes, instead attributing the comments to the teachers feeling overwhelmed.

IMPACT: Special educators feel isolated and unsupported, while students with disabilities face teacher bias.

SCENARIO 4 • LACK OF RECOGNITION: A special educator successfully transitions a non-verbal student to use a communication device. The principal says, "Oh, is he also working on speech?"

IMPACT: The special educator feels that the principal does not understand the complexity nor importance of this achievement, and that their specialized expertise is unappreciated.

ROOT CAUSE #4 ILLUSTRATION

Making Achievement Invisible

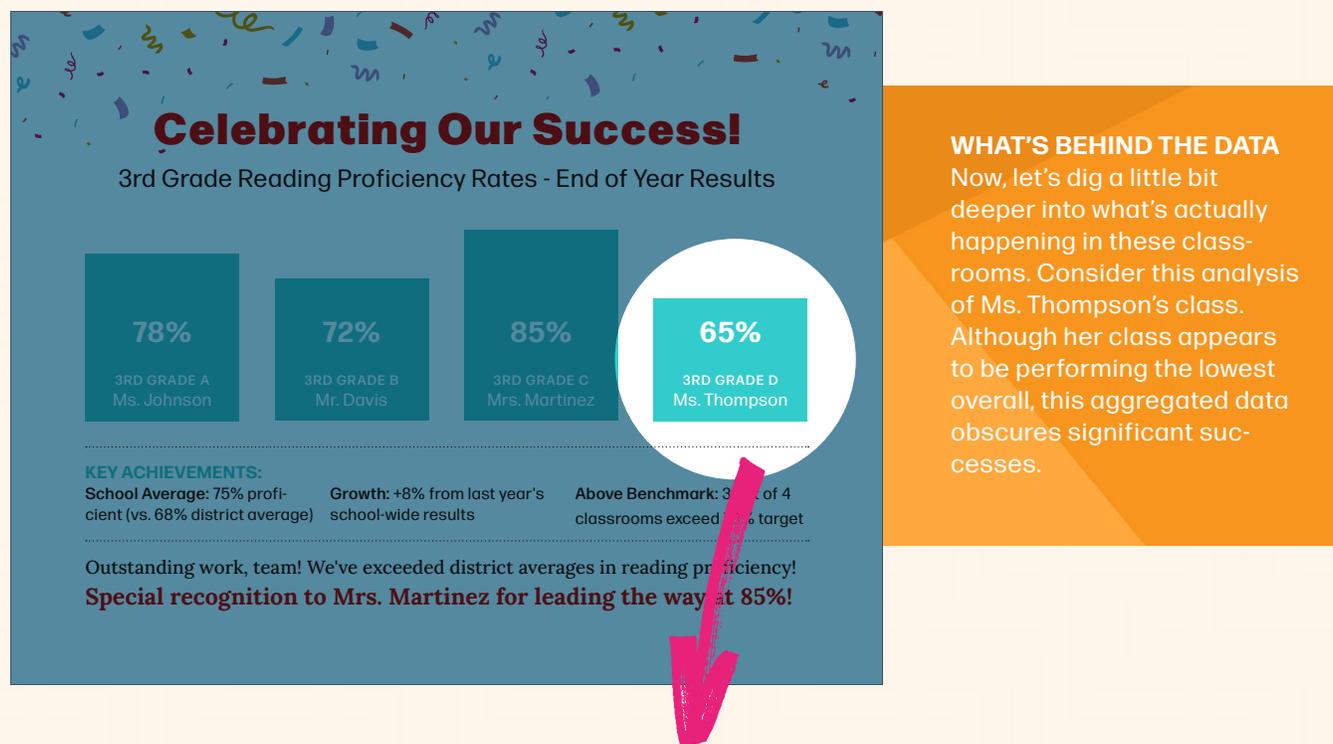
When student achievement data are aggregated at the school or grade level, special educators' achievements often remain invisible to administrators. This can obscure the significant gains made by students with disabilities who may still perform below grade-level benchmarks despite meaningful growth. Without disaggregated data that track sub-population growth and follow individual student progress, administrators may overlook the profound impact that special education teachers have on their students' development. This lack of visibility can lead to the undervaluation of special educators' expertise and contributions, particularly when accountability systems focus solely on proficiency metrics (e.g. the percentage of students proficient) rather than individualized progress and growth.



FOR EXAMPLE:
Look at this sample slide from a recent faculty meeting. Imagine you were the special educator who co-teaches across 3rd-grade classrooms. Is your work visible in this celebration? Are the students you support celebrated?

The Data Behind the Data

What the aggregated numbers don't show: Special Education Impact



LOOKING DEEPER AT "LOWEST PERFORMING" CLASS

Includes 8 students receiving special education services (35% of class)

ALEX | +2.3 YEARS

Reading Growth
Still below grade level

MARIA | +1.8 YEARS

Reading Growth
Still below grade level

JORDAN | +2.1 YEARS

Reading Growth
Still below grade level

SAM | +1.5 YEARS

Reading Growth
Still below grade level

EXTRAORDINARY GROWTH, INVISIBLE IN PROFICIENCY METRICS:

- **AVERAGE GROWTH:** Students with IEPs showed 1.9 years of reading growth in one academic year
- **IEP GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** 7 out of 8 students met or exceeded their individualized reading goals
- **FUNCTIONAL SKILLS:** 100% improvement in reading comprehension strategies and self-advocacy
- **COLLABORATION IMPACT:** Ms. Thompson worked with 3 special educators, SLP, and OT weekly

THE RESULT:

Ms. Thompson's class appears "lowest performing" in the celebration slide, despite facilitating some of the most significant student growth in the building. The special educators' expertise and impact remain completely invisible in the data presentation.

The Pandemic's Lasting Damage: School Safety and Student Behavior

While pre-2020 research found limited evidence linking student behavioral issues to special educator attrition,¹² the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally shifted this dynamic. The initial shift to remote learning significantly disrupted service delivery for students with disabilities.¹³ In the return to in-person learning, we have seen a nationwide increase in specific student behaviors,¹⁴ namely increased apathy, heightened disrespect and defiance, and electronic device reliance. The National Center for Education Statistics found that more than 80% of U.S. public schools reported that the pandemic negatively impacted student behavior and socio-emotional development.¹⁵

How does school safety and student behavior impact special educators?

→ **A DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON SPECIAL EDUCATORS:** Special educators often work with more students with behavioral needs than general educators. This is no coincidence—it is by design; that when a student's behavior significantly impedes their learning, or when the behavior is a manifestation of a disability, the student might be found eligible for special education services.

The “Catch-All” Intervention Phenomenon: Many special educators report being treated as a school's go-to staff member for behavioral response. This can take the following forms:

- “Can you take this student for a while? They're disrupting my class”
- Being asked to cover behavioral crises outside their assigned students
- Having students moved to their programs primarily for behavioral reasons rather than academic need
- Being expected to handle escalated situations because “you're trained for this”

This positioning unfairly places special educators in the role of the catch-all solution for behavioral challenges across the building, rather than having in place systematic, school-wide approaches that support all students with behavioral needs. When overwhelmed teachers lack support, research shows that they often default to more punitive approaches (which easier to implement when exhausted), rigid rule enforcement (requires less emotional energy), and exclusionary practices (which removes the immediate stressor). This creates an environment that is the opposite of what these students need, perpetuating the behavioral challenges.¹⁶

→ **EVIDENCE-BASED BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION CAN BE TIME CONSUMING:** Although there are many evidence-based interventions that could positively address student behaviors (e.g., Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports [PBIS]), sometimes the administrative demands of planning and tracking such interventions paradoxically worsen the teacher burnout it aims to prevent. As a result, special educators experience higher stress levels, and burned-out teachers may be more likely to respond to behavioral challenges with authoritarian strategies that fail to address challenging student behaviors.¹⁷

IRL: A Real Life Example

Let's see what happens when all of these root causes converge in a real-life scenario.

Read through the case study below and ask yourself the following questions.

- How do Mr. Diaz's increased teaching complexity, compliance commitments, and insufficient curricular resources contribute to his burnout?
- How do colleagues and administrators' words and actions contribute?
- How might special educators experience professional isolation differently from their general educator peers?

Some examples of the root causes in action are highlighted here. What others do you notice?

Mr. Diaz is a middle school special educator assigned to the 6th grade team. He follows the section of students with the greatest number of IEPs and offers additional support during content classes. The general education teachers send him their plans in advance and ask him for help in scaffolding materials. ¹ He also teaches pull out intervention groups for students who need supplemental instruction. As the main point of contact for students with disabilities in sixth grade, he is also responsible for supporting the case manager with all compliance paperwork, including monitoring and communicating IEP progress and attending meetings. He attends all grade team meetings.

Over the course of the year, Mr. Diaz has gotten to know his students well and has built strong relationships across the 6th grade team. Despite this, he feels like he's constantly falling short. Although he reviews all the teachers' plans, he has limited time to connect with the teachers ahead of class, so most of his support happens in the moment. ² Although the Tier 1 curriculum includes recommendations for how to differentiate, the school has not purchased the corresponding intervention curricular materials. Mr. Diaz leverages the intervention group time to explicitly reteach what students did not learn during the core instructional block, leveraging the existing classroom materials. ³

Mr. Diaz tries to do most compliance work at home so that he can leverage his preps to follow up with colleagues. ⁴ When he has to leave the 6th grade team to attend IEP meetings, he feels like he is letting the team and students down. Recently, when Mr. Diaz had to step out of a class period to attend an IEP meeting,

¹ The Tier 1 curriculum doesn't include the types of differentiation that Mr. Diaz needs for his students, so he's constantly creating materials.

² Mr. Diaz' job is requires more complex collaboration than his peers, and the time to protect collaboration isn't built-in to the schedule. This leaves him running around and feeling unsuccessful.

³ There is an opportunity for the instructional leaders to a) show general educators how to differentiate their Tier 1 instruction leveraging the existing materials and b) provide Mr. Diaz with more explicit instructions about how to strategically maximize the intervention groups (so he isn't making the decision about what and how to teach on his own).

⁴ Compliance work often isn't collaborative, and is invisible to the non-special educators. It also requires detailed focus, so can be hard to do in between other tasks.

the general education teacher followed up with him, sharing “that his students really struggled” without him there; ⁵ she asked him to follow-up with the case manager to ask that IEP meetings not be scheduled during that class.

Midway through the year, the principal sends out an “Intent to Return” survey asking if teachers will be returning for the following school year. Mr. Diaz indicates “maybe.” ⁶

The school has a series of “Data Days” after each semester when content teams get together to review assessment data and use the data to prepare plans for the next units. At the beginning of the day, the instructional deans present a general overview of how all students are doing, sharing the averages across sections. ⁷ Mr. Diaz spends these days moving between content teams to make sure he has an understanding of what the general education teachers are doing to respond to the data. ⁸ In the evenings, he plans for his pull-out intervention groups.

Throughout the spring, the number of students referred for both behavioral and academic intervention increases resulting in more formal evaluations. Since the pandemic, an increasing number of students are experiencing learning challenges; some of which manifest as academic frustration and negative behaviors. Mr. Diaz finds the additional administrative burden of the behavior intervention systems a lot to manage on top of his existing caseload.

At the end of the year, the 6th grade team has some of the best ELA and math results in the school. The math and ELA content teachers are celebrated by the principal and instructional dean at the end of year celebration. ⁹

In June, Mr. Diaz approaches the principal and says that he wants to move to a different, non-special educator position. When the principal presses Mr. Diaz on why he wants the change, Mr. Diaz explains that the “job is too hard.” He shares that he cannot imagine teaching another year unless he can change positions.

⁵ The general educator’s comment reflects a lack of collective ownership (“your” students vs. “my” students).

⁶ There is a missed opportunity for the principal to followup explicitly with Mr. Diaz and seek to understand the root causes behind his “maybe.”

⁷ There is a missed opportunity here to drive home the idea of collective responsibility. Rather than sharing section averages, the instructional dean could also share the data broken down by subpopulations (e.g. “students with IEPs” and “MLLs”) to build collective responsibility.

⁸ The onus is on Mr. Diaz to move across the content teams and learn what he can. Alternative approaches could include the instructional dean asking general educators to synthesize takeaways for their cross-content special educator colleagues, or explicit direction from the instructional leadership about where Mr. Diaz should allocate his time.

⁹ Mr. Diaz may have been a major driver of student outcomes, but his contributions might feel invisible in the team celebration.

The role of the special educator is distinct from other teaching roles. Special education teachers face unique challenges, and they burn out for different reasons than other teachers.

STRATEGIES

Now that we have identified the key factors driving special educators out of the profession, we can present some targeted strategies to address these root causes and improve retention.

Actions to take **NOW**:

1. Know what you do not know: If you have never been a special educator, do not assume you know what the job entails. Be curious and seek to increase visibility into the work of your special educators. If YOU have not had the experience of being a special educator, you have not lived the challenges described above. And you are also not alone. Fewer than 18% of principals have direct experience with children with disabilities.

- Reflect on your own teaching experience to identify gaps in your knowledge and experience.
 - Hear from your special educators about what makes the unique challenges they face in their jobs.
 - Observe your special educators in action both through classroom observations and attending compliance meetings.
 - Survey your special educators to hear how they perceive their role in the school and the support they need.
 - Substitute-teach a classroom that has a high percentage of students with disabilities, prioritizing a self-contained setting if one exists in your school, and reflect on the experience.
 - Sit in on an IEP meeting. Ask the case manager to walk you through all the steps that went into preparing for the meeting.
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2. Publicly recognize (and make visible) the unique role and contributions of special educators.

As a principal, where you devote time and attention communicates to the staff what you see as important.

- Share a reflection about the work of a special educator in your weekly principal newsletter.
- Highlight special educator practices during faculty meetings, such as showcasing differentiated instruction strategies that benefit all students.
- When celebrating student outcome data, ensure that you celebrate the specific contributions of special educators to those data.
- Acknowledge when special educators face competing demands (e.g., choosing between grade-level teams) and publicly appreciate the school community's collaborative support in navigating these challenges.
- Recognize special educators' compliance work publicly to validate its importance to the school community.
- Create "Special Education Spotlight" features on the school website or social media that profile individual special educators and their unique contributions to student success.

- Invite special educators to present at district leadership meetings or educational conferences, positioning them as experts in inclusive practices and individualized learning.
 - Establish peer observation opportunities where general education teachers can observe special education classrooms to learn about specialized instructional techniques and relationship-building approaches.
 - Recognize special educators during school board meetings or community events, sharing specific examples of how their work impacts students' academic, social, and emotional growth.
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3. Model and celebrate examples of “collective responsibility.” (All students are OUR students.)

- Celebrate examples of general educators taking intentional steps to be inclusive of all students, including students with disabilities, in their core instruction.
- Recognize teachers who proactively reach out to specialists (e.g., special education teachers, counselors, interventionists, and related service providers) to collaborate on supporting individual students.
- Highlight instances where teachers meaningfully accommodate assessments or instruction based on insights from colleagues who work with the same students. Look for examples that maintain rigor.
- Showcase teachers who use data from multiple sources (not just their own classroom) to inform their instruction.
- Make student outcome data for students with disabilities publicly available and easy to access. Encourage all staff members to regularly review this data, discuss what it reveals about students with disabilities' experiences, and identify specific changes they can make to better serve every student.
- Celebrate when schoolwide initiatives (e.g., literacy strategies or behavior supports) show positive results across all student groups.
- Recognize staff who advocate for resources or policy changes that benefit students beyond their direct responsibilities.
- Recognize teachers who advocate upward for systemic changes that would benefit all students.
- Showcase collaborative efforts to intentionally engage families of students with disabilities in school activities and decision-making.



Celebrating vs. Tokenizing: Avoiding the Pitfall of Low Expectations

The distinction between genuine celebration and tokenism is critical to maintaining high expectations for all students. Students with disabilities have historically faced lowered expectations, and tokenistic celebration can perpetuate this harmful pattern by praising minimal compliance rather than meaningful outcomes. When we celebrate surface-level inclusion without examining whether students are genuinely challenged and growing academically, we risk masking inequitable practices and reinforcing deficit-based thinking. This approach can damage students' self-efficacy by suggesting they should be grateful for basic access rather than expecting the same high-quality education as their peers. Oftentimes, special educators are particularly attuned to this sort of false celebration.

Features of Genuine Celebration:

- **CELEBRATES MEANINGFUL IMPACT:**
Recognizes actions that demonstrably improve outcomes for students
- **HIGHLIGHTS TRANSFERABLE PRACTICES:**
Showcases strategies that other educators can adapt and implement
- **FOCUSSES ON EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE:**
Celebrates efforts that raise the bar for all students, rather than lowering it
- **ACKNOWLEDGES SYSTEMATIC CHANGE:**
Recognizes shifts in practice that become embedded in school culture

What Tokenism Looks Like (and What to Avoid):

- **CELEBRATES GOOD INTENTIONS OVER OUTCOMES:** Praising minimal compliance or effort that does not actually benefit students (e.g., celebrating teachers for "trying" without evidence of student benefit)
- **OVER-CELEBRATES BASIC RESPONSIBILITIES LIKE INCLUSION AND ACCOMMODATING INSTRUCTION:** Making a big deal of simply having students with disabilities present without meaningful engagement or simply putting in place required accommodations
- **ONE-OFF RECOGNITION:** Highlighting isolated incidents that do not represent sustained commitment to improvement

Actions to plan for in the **NEXT 3-4 MONTHS:**

1. Limit the number of preps, grade bands, and contents for which a special educator is responsible.

- If a secondary special educator is responsible for following a cohort of students across all contents, consider departmentalizing your special educator team so that teachers can focus on 1-2 contents.
 - If an elementary is organized such that cohorts of students spend the day in one class, consider pairing special educators with grade levels so that they can deepen relationships with the grade team.
 - If a high school special educator is responsible for remedial reading intervention, consider limiting their preps by scheduling them to focus on students with similar needs across the school.
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2. Explicitly define each special educator's compliance responsibilities.

Determine the total number of students with IEPs assigned to each special educator, as well as assess the complexity level of those IEPs.

- Conduct regular caseload audits to document the actual number of IEPs for which each special educator is responsible.
 - Review the types and frequency of services specified for each IEP (e.g., speech, occupational therapy, counseling). More services may require more cross-practitioner collaboration (e.g., gathering progress updates from each related service).
 - Analyze the intensity of modifications and accommodations required. Consider developing a complexity rubric that considers factors such as the number of goals, service hours, and time commitment to implement the IEP.
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3. Allocate and strategically schedule prep time to complete compliance responsibilities.

- Create flexible staff scheduling where prep time increases proportionally with case complexity (e.g., an additional 30 minutes per week for the five highest-complexity IEPs).
- Offer extended prep blocks quarterly (rather than short weekly periods) to draft IEP progress updates and work on upcoming IEP meetings, since IEP tasks often require sustained focus time.
- Schedule more prep or compliance roll off time for special educators during high-volume annual review cycles (e.g., if the majority of annual reviews occur in the same month, allocate a roll off prep during that same time period).

4. Ensure that teacher collaboration structures (e.g., planning meetings) specifically accommodate the unique responsibilities and scheduling needs of special educators.

- Create a rotating meeting schedule so that special educators can attend grade-level or subject-area team meetings.
 - Include special educators as permanent members of grade levels or subject-area teams.
 - Schedule collaboration meetings during times when special educators do not provide direct services.
 - Create explicit meeting times for co-teaching planning sessions between general and special educators who share the same students.
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5. Provide special educators with opportunities to collaborate with and learn from other special educators performing similar roles.

- Create an informal mentoring relationship in which special educators with varying strengths are paired to support each other.
- Provide opportunities for special educators to build bridges with the special educator community, such as visiting neighboring schools or districts, or attending national conferences.
- Encourage special educators to attend national conferences or regional convenings of special education professionals.

What about TEACHER PAY?

Compensation remains a frequently discussed solution for special educator attrition. In some ways it feels intuitive: “If we think the job is harder, pay people more to do it.”¹⁸ However, rigorous quantitative studies show weak effects of the impact of pay for special educators. Rather, evidence suggests that increased compensation is more effective at filling vacancies than retaining special education teachers. Nonetheless, pay is frequently discussed in the literature as a lever for addressing attrition.^{19 20}

Actions to Plan for **OVER TIME:**

1. Ensure that your high quality instructional materials include sufficient guidance for differentiating access to grade-level content.

- Choose a Tier 1 curriculum that was designed based on a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach. Such curricula will come with differentiated supports.
 - When selecting a curriculum, choose materials that include an intervention program that aligns with the curriculum.
 - Many publishers offer professional learning for teachers on the conceptual underpinnings of the curriculum; ensure that special educators have access to this training so that they can differentiate without sacrificing rigor.
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2. Ensure that the instructional vision for the school explicitly guides teachers regarding how intervention blocks support the overall vision.

- Distinguish between intervention blocks that are designed to supplement core instruction (e.g., preteach, reteach, and provide more time/practice) and intervention blocks that are designated for remedial instruction (e.g., remedial phonics).
 - Explain to all teachers how the core and intervention blocks fit together, as well as how teachers should work together to ensure instructional cohesion and alignment for students.
 - Clarify which data special educators should look at, when, and for what purpose.
 - Create visual flowcharts or decision trees that show teachers when to refer students for different types of interventions and how these interventions connect back to grade-level content standards.
 - Establish clear communication protocols between general and special educators about what content is covered in core instruction. This ensures that intervention time can be used strategically to preview, reinforce, or extend learning rather than occurring in isolation.
 - Develop scheduling templates that show how intervention blocks align with core instruction timing (e.g., pre-teaching vocabulary before a unit begins, or providing additional practice immediately after new concepts are introduced).
-

3. Include special education mindsets (collective responsibility) and special education-related responsibilities in all teacher orientation and training.

- Build the idea that “all teachers are responsible for all students” into all new staff training.
- Provide explicit training on compliance responsibilities, including how to read an IEP, how to partner with your special educator, etc.

- Create “collaboration expectations” documents that outline specific ways that general and special educators should work together (e.g., weekly check-ins, shared planning time, communication protocols) and include these in job descriptions and onboarding materials.
 - Provide practical training on accommodations and modifications with hands-on practice in implementing common supports (assistive technology, visual aids, alternative assessment formats) so that new teachers feel confident making adjustments without lowering expectations.
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4. Establish Clear Accountability Systems and Data Practices That Demonstrate Collective Responsibility for All Student Outcomes

- Create shared data review protocols in which general and special educators jointly analyze student progress data (both IEP goals and grade-level standards) to identify when students need additional support or when interventions are working effectively.
- Develop accountability measures that reflect collective responsibility by including metrics in teacher evaluations that show how well general educators collaborate with special educators and support students with disabilities in accessing grade-level content, as well as how special educators contribute to school-wide academic goals.
- Implement regular “data walks” or progress monitoring meetings where teams review how special education services support broader school improvement goals (e.g., how co-teaching models affect overall reading proficiency rates, or how inclusion practices impact classroom culture metrics).
- Establish clear documentation systems that show the connection between specialized instruction and school-wide outcomes, such as tracking how students receiving special education services are progressing toward grade-level standards, not just IEP goals.
- Create accountability structures for collaboration. Set expectations that general educators will report on differentiation strategies that they implement and their effectiveness, while special educators document how their interventions align with and support Tier 1 instruction and school improvement priorities.
- Use data to drive resource allocation decisions by regularly reviewing which collaborative practices and intervention approaches are the most effective, and then adjusting staffing, scheduling, and support accordingly.

YEAR AT-A-GLANCE

Throughout the year, there are key actions to consider that affect special educators' retention. The following chart breaks down commonly taken school-wide actions and suggestions for explicit inclusion of special educators.

SUMMER: BEFORE SCHOOL STARTS THROUGH DAY 1!

Key Actions and Events that Occur During this Season	What action steps could you take to improve retention of special educators?
Onboarding New Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Ensure that new teachers understand their collective responsibility for all students. ➔ Ensure that new teachers have baseline training and background knowledge about special education basics (e.g., how to read an IEP).
Creating the Master Schedule and Calendar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Protect special educator and general educator collaboration time by explicitly building it into the schedule. ➔ Consider which meetings special educators should attend and schedule so that it is possible (e.g., grade team meetings). ➔ Allocate time for compliance responsibilities depending on a special educator's caseload (e.g., a half-day per month may be appropriate for some special educators but too much/too little for others).
Creating Student Groupings/Classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Use assessment and IEP data to group students. ➔ Consider how to group students so that they have strategic access to staff members throughout the day. ➔ Ensure that all staff members know which students have IEPs and have a "cheat sheet" of the required accommodations.
Summer PD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Ensure that general educators understand their collective responsibility for all students, their special education responsibilities and how/when they should partner with special educators. ➔ Ensure that special educators have content training and grade-level collaboration opportunities to build strong relationships with their colleagues.
Year-long Goals and Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Set school-wide goals to be inclusive of subpopulations (e.g., students with disabilities, MLLs).

DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

Key Actions and Events that Occur During this Season	What action steps could you take to improve retention of special educators?
Observation & Feedback / Classroom Walkthroughs	→ Include intervention groups, co-taught classes, etc. in school walkthroughs and observation-feedback cycles.
Lesson Planning Meetings	→ Schedule lesson plan internalization at times when both co-teachers can attend and plan how they will co-implement a lesson.
Review Assessment Data	→ Recreate student groupings based on updated instructional data. → Ensure that all teachers understand their responsibility to review their data and create a plan in collaboration with teachers who teach the same students.
Weekly Professional Development	→ Ensure that special educators are clear about which meetings they should attend and why; include in the framing for PD sessions how to transfer the day's learnings to all teachers.
Weekly Emails	→ Use a principal memo to shout out examples of collective responsibility, make special educator work more visible, and build skills for teaching students with a wide range of needs. → During seasons with a higher number of IEP meetings, flag this work for the all staff even if it does not affect all staff directly.
Holiday Celebrations and Staff Appreciation	→ Whether for Thanksgiving or the winter holidays, explicitly shout out the unique contributions of special educators.
Initial Sense of Who's Returning for Next Year	→ Gather a sense of teachers' intent to return the following year and follow up with special educators who indicate no or maybe; learn what is at the root of their dissatisfaction.
Mid-year Evaluations	→ Coordinate formal evaluations for general educators and special educators so that they occur during the same class period.

ACTION PLAN: KEEP YOUR SPECIAL EDUCATORS!

DATA COLLECTION: How will you find out what your special educators are experiencing in your school?

Here are some ways to gather information:

- **EXISTING SURVEYS:** Leverage existing surveys and focus on responses from special educators. If you already have school-wide adult culture climate surveys, review your special educators' responses with attention to how their responses differ from those of general education teachers.
- **FOCUS GROUPS AND LISTENING SESSIONS:** Organize small group discussions (3-5 special educators) to dive deeper into specific issues. Frame the conversation to establish clear ground rules about confidentiality and non-retaliation. Special educators may have unique insights into systemic barriers that emerge better in conversation than in surveys.
- **ONE-ON-ONE CHECK-INS:** Schedule regular individual meetings that go beyond evaluation conversations. Many special educators appreciate time dedicated to discussing their specific challenges, from IEP compliance concerns to collaboration difficulties with general education teachers.
- **OBSERVATION AND INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS:** Spend time in special education classrooms and attend compliance meetings. Pay attention to body language, stress indicators, and the general atmosphere. Sometimes the most valuable data come from what educators do not say directly.

How will you learn about what your special educators are experiencing?	When will you implement this strategy?
1	
2	
3	

ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS: Look through all of the information you have gathered. Think through the top root causes of special educator burnout. What are the top three causes contributing to special educator burnout at your school?

Root Cause	When will you implement this strategy?

PROBLEM DEFINITION:

ACTION PLAN: What are the top actions you will take to address the root causes?

	What are the TOP ACTIONS that you will take to address the root causes of special educators?	When will you implement this strategy?
SHORT TERM	1	
	2	
MEDIUM TERM	1	
	2	
LONG TERM	1	
	2	

Endnotes

- 1 On average, schools lose up to 29% of special education teachers annually (Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>). These staffing problems are most severe in schools serving students of color (Goldhaber, D., Falken, G. T., & Theobald, R. (2024). What do teacher job postings tell us about school hiring needs and equity? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 1623737241246548. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241246548>).
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- 13 <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10275652/>
- 14 <https://content.acsa.org/navigating-post-pandemic-student-behavior-strategies-for-teachers-and-school-administrators/>
- 15 <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/is-student-behavior-getting-any-better-what-a-new-survey-says/2025/01>
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