

CHAPTER 8

STICK WITH ME



Given the unique learning needs of students with disabilities, they benefit even more than other students from consistency over time. When school leaders and teachers stay at their school for many years, they develop trusting and supportive relationships with students, families and one another.

► **THE PROBLEM: HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ARE HARD TO FIND AND KEEP**

Nationwide, there is a shortage of special education teachers. In the 2013-2014 school year, 49 states reported a shortage of special education teachers or related service personnel.⁹⁵ In 2011, 51% of all school districts and 90% of high-poverty schools reported having difficulty recruiting highly qualified special education teachers.⁹⁶

This shortage partially comes from the fact that special education teachers are at an increased risk of leaving the profession. Special education teachers leave the profession at nearly double the rate of general education teachers.⁹⁷

There are many different reasons for this. When researchers synthesized research around the topic in the last 30 years, they found that key factors leading to special education burn-out include the lack of administrative support, paperwork, and challenging student behaviors.⁹⁸ Other researchers looked at “role overload” -- the experience of feeling there are “too many unique demands on one’s time and resources.”⁹⁹

Others point to the unique loneliness of the job. As NPR reported in 2015, “On top of the normal demands of teaching, special education teachers face additional pressures: feelings of isolation, fear of lawsuits, and students who demand extra attention. Many are the only special-needs teacher in their grade or their school, or sometimes in the entire district.”¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, special education teachers face all these struggles daily.

Burnt-out teachers are less effective with their students. A research review showed that students with disabilities who have exhausted or disengaged teachers perform worse.¹⁰¹ These students are “frequently disruptive, struggle socially and emotionally, and attain their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals less frequently -- all of which impact academic development.”¹⁰²

When their special education teachers decide to leave the school, students also suffer. Schools with high “relational trust” (good social relationships among members of the school community) have higher student achievement. But this is only possible when educators stay with a school for a long period of time. As some research has argued, because teacher turnover “disrupts the formation or maintenance of these relationships, it may also harm student achievement.”¹⁰³

Many studies have shown that teacher turnover has a disruptive effect on feelings of school community and trust. When teachers leave schools, relationships built between students and schools are lost.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, recent research has found that schools serving low-income communities of color find it harder to both find and retain qualified special education teachers.¹⁰⁵ The uneven distribution of these teachers makes it harder for these schools to achieve high results for students with disabilities.

Special education teachers and school leaders are also underprepared

At the same time, even the special education teachers that stay often lack mastery of general education content. Before helping make general education curriculum more accessible to students with disabilities, special education teachers must first have core knowledge of general education topics on their own.¹⁰⁶ And yet, often special education training focuses on “instructional strategies in isolation from the general education curriculum.”¹⁰⁷ As of 2011, only 17 states required a person seeking a special education license to first complete a general education license.¹⁰⁸ In California, only 36% of new special education teachers in 2015–16 had a preliminary teaching credential.¹⁰⁹

According to a report by the Learning Policy Institute, in California the proportion of underprepared new special education teachers has grown significantly in the last two years. “When schools struggle to fill a position with a qualified teacher, they often hire teachers who are still in training or who hold emergency-type permits without training.”¹¹⁰ By 2015–16, nearly two-thirds (64%) of new special education teachers in California had qualifications below the usual standard. As the Learning Policy Institute noted, “In no other major teaching field do interns, permits, and waivers make up a majority of new teachers.”¹¹¹

Unfortunately, principals are also rarely prepared to support students with disabilities. A literature review by the University of Florida found that:

- Most school leadership preparation programs -- even those that “embrace a social justice model of leadership” -- neglect special education. In one study, 53% of principals claimed they had not taken any courses related to special education.
- A review of curriculum of school leadership programs also found that disability and special education topics did not receive much attention. When these topics were addressed, the focus was on the legal technicalities of special education and not on actual instructional practices and strategies.¹¹²

THE SOLUTION: TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, SCHOOL LEADERS AND DISTRICT STAFF HAVE TO SUPPORT THEIR TEACHERS

Research has shown that students perform better when they have strong academic and social support from teachers, parents, community members, and peers.¹¹³ But this is even more true for students with disabilities, who need stability and consistency more than most. Students with disabilities need ongoing, authentic relationships with caring adults who know and understand them. They need adults who have the knowledge to try different interventions in search of the right solutions, as well as the patience to keep trying when those interventions don’t work. In other words, students with disabilities need great teachers who stick around so that both can grow together over time.

Principals must make smart choices about their team and resources

Principals don't have to be experts in special education. But if they aren't, the most successful principals hire people who are.

Heath Caceres, the principal at Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, devotes significant time to actively recruiting teachers who have the expertise his team needs. "I have to realize I'm going to be a learner too. I know a lot of things but I don't know everything. I can't do what Jordan does for PBIS (positive behavioral intervention and supports), or what Mary does for technology. I can bring in my own expertise, but I also should give them license to go ahead and do what they need to do."

Caceres has made strategic staffing choices to make sure teachers have support. The school is a magnet for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and about 16% of students have IEPs. He took advantage of the flexibility he had in his budget to channel resources towards more teachers with special education expertise. He's hired fewer paraprofessionals and more resource specialist program (RSP) teachers. Whereas most RSP teachers have a caseload of around 30 students, at Lafayette they only have 14. The school also works with two local universities to bring in student teachers for extra help. In the 2017-2018 school year, they had 13 student teachers serving 25 classrooms. The principal believes assistance from student teachers has been a critical factor in preventing teacher burn-out. At Lafayette, the student-teacher ratio is now down to 11:1.

Districts can give principals the autonomy to make critical decisions about staffing and where to put resources. They can also provide support and training for principals to navigate complex special education rules. Research has found that when principals put their full administrative support behind special education teachers, students with disabilities achieve more. Ultimately, this leads to better outcomes for students with disabilities or any other students who are struggling.¹¹⁴

Create a culture of collaboration

Administrative support alone is not enough. Teacher retention also requires creating a strong culture that includes collaboration. Research has shown that teachers are more likely to stay when they have productive working relationships with colleagues.¹¹⁵ According to one study examining teachers' working conditions and their job satisfaction: "Teachers have chosen a career in which social relationships are central, and they find that their work with students is influenced heavily by the relationships they form with other adults -- their principal and their colleagues -- in the school."¹¹⁶ The study found that both new and veteran teachers are more likely to stay teaching in a school where all teachers share responsibility for student success.¹¹⁷

A 2013 international survey of middle school teachers by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development also found that when teachers are "included in school decision-making and collaborate often with others," they are "more likely to say that teaching is a valued profession in their society." These teachers also report higher levels of job satisfaction and confidence in their work.¹¹⁸ Research has also found that teacher collaboration can lead to improved pedagogy, better student behavior management, more student-centered instruction, and a greater ability to reflect on and adapt instruction.¹¹⁹

In Snowline Joint Unified in Southern California, Pam DeRenard, an elementary special education teacher, said collaboration was crucial to helping students with disabilities succeed during recent reforms: "All of our students learn differently, and having the time for teachers to bounce ideas off each other has been beneficial to our teaching. We learn new strategies and different ways to reach our students. Collaboration is the key to unlocking our special education students' potential."¹²⁰

Teachers shouldn't have to use their break times to find time to collaborate. Research shows that teachers are more likely to stay in the profession when they have access to collaboration on-site, at school, continuously throughout the year.¹²¹ Snowline District gives special education teachers full days to meet and analyze data together, identify strengths and weaknesses, and collaborate on lesson-planning and instructional strategy. When schools and districts provide that time within a teacher's workday, they send the message that collaboration is a priority.

"Grow your own" - Create a pipeline for great teachers to become school leaders

One of the most effective ways to both combat teacher turnover and improve school leadership is to create more supportive networks for dedicated teachers within a district. The book "Turning Around a High-Poverty District: Learning from Sanger" examined how Sanger Unified School District in California made this work. "Typically, when a district loses strong leaders, it launches a search for outside candidates."¹²² Instead, leaders in Sanger made a conscious decision to "grow their own, believing that Sanger's culture and practices are best preserved by those already familiar with them."

From 2008 to 2013, the district filled every single principal and district administrator vacancy with educators within their district. They did this by making several key changes. First, they helped train principals to become strong instructional leaders. Instead of focusing on "managing the school building," they shifted principals' focus to creating a strong, positive school culture. They also held principals accountable for tracking progress on key initiatives.

They encouraged excellent teachers to become school coaches, called Curriculum Service Providers (CSPs). They also partnered with Fresno State University (FSU) to bring an administration credentialing program to the district. CSPs had the opportunity to enroll and attend classes with FSU within the district. This not only made professional development more convenient. It also created "a support group among those enrolled in the program." Many CSPs eventually went on to become assistant principals and principals.¹²³

KIPP Raíces, a charter school in Los Angeles, has also taken this approach. The school has seven full-time and one part-time staff member supporting special education, and the KIPP Los Angeles network office has several program managers that serve all the schools in their Los Angeles network, as well as a director of special education, who has worked in many different special education environments and schools for more than 20 years. Since the school was founded in 2009, the special education team has grown by bringing in specialists from other schools or by promoting teachers or specialists to new levels. The principal has worked at the school since 2009 -- she was a founding first grade teacher -- and each year more than 90% of teachers return to the school.

KIPP LA also strives to provide as many services as possible in-house, rather than contracting services out to an external provider. "This way we can actually control the quality of our services," said Kim Dammann, KIPP LA Managing Director of Special Education. "It takes someone who works within the team on an ongoing basis to really meet kids' needs. It's getting to know the teachers and students and understanding the culture, and going above and beyond to help them with whatever they need."

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE



STICK WITH ME

Given the unique learning needs of students with disabilities, they benefit even more than other students from consistency over time. When school leaders and teachers stay at their school for many years, they develop trusting and supportive relationships with students, families and one another.

WHAT TO ASK

- Do the district, CMO and/or school retain special education teachers at the same rate as other teachers? How do they proactively avoid burnout? Do they provide training and support to staff and allocate resources to make sure that workloads are manageable?
- Do they support the growth of staff with ongoing professional development and coaching? Are there strong pathways to develop talent from within (like paraprofessionals training to become teachers)?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- Retention rates for special education teachers and paraprofessionals are equal to or stronger than those of general education teachers.
- The district / charter school network keeps special education teachers at the same school to ensure consistency, rather than rotating them to a different school from one year to the next.
- The district has training and credentialing programs in place to support experienced paraprofessionals to become teachers.
- The district has clear standards and expectations for special education teachers, including an instructional teaching rubric.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- The school leader has developed strong systems to train, coach, and support special education teachers. These systems are not managed separately from the support and development of general education teachers. Special education teachers typically report directly to the principal, not an external supervisor.
- Special education teachers receive coaching and feedback about how they teach and support students, not just about IEP implementation and compliance. Teachers report that the feedback is valuable and helps them grow in their practice.
- Some members of the school's leadership team (principal, assistant principal, deans, department chairs, grade-level chairs, etc.) have special education expertise.
- The school allocates resources and hires sufficient staff in ways that best support students with disabilities. They ensure that special education staff have reasonable caseloads of students.
- The school allocates resources so special education staff provide support to students across one to two grade levels (maximum) OR one to two subject areas (maximum), instead of supporting many different grades and subjects.



WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- Teachers and other staff actively collaborate to support the needs of students.
- The school team supports special education staff with coaching, professional development, and additional planning time so they can help students succeed.
- The administrative team creates a professional culture of excellence that makes teachers want to stay.