

## Why Special Educators Really Leave the Classroom

It's not just about paperwork, parents, and hard-to-manage students

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It's easy to feel sorry for special education teachers.

Challenging students, prickly parents, crushing paperwork: They all go with the territory, and contribute to a level of attrition among special educators that is said to be much higher than that of their regular education teaching peers.

But those problems are only part of the reason special educators struggle. In surveys, research papers, and interviews, special educators say their jobs are also made difficult by factors that are well within school and district leaders' power to change. Those include a lack of support from principals, difficulty balancing competing priorities from various supervisors, ignorance (and sometimes disrespect) of the job from peers, and a workload that takes special educators away from what they really want to do: teach children.

### 'We Don't Really Know What You Do'

These views are not universal, but they're common. And without understanding that these are problems that schools and districts can address, holding on to special educators—whose ranks have declined by more than 17 percent between 2006 and 2016—will end up being even more of an uphill battle.

Tai Hinkins, who works as a charter school administrator in South Florida, said she started her education career through an alternative-certification route. Her first placement was in a mixed class of K-3 students with disabilities that included autism, Down syndrome, and emotional disturbances.

"I wasn't even given books" that first year, said Hinkins, who, along with some other educators in this article, asked that the name of her current school be withheld. "The curriculum specialist at the time stated that [exceptional student education] teachers had never asked for general education curriculum materials before."

Jeff Mendenhall, a former special education teacher who was recently hired as the dean of students at an Indianapolis-area middle school, said the students, far from driving him out of the field, are among the reasons why he has stayed in the profession.

"People might complain about paperwork, parent phone calls, things like that. If you're getting into it, you should probably have a pretty good understanding those are part of the job," Mendenhall said.

What he found most frustrating, he said, is that "as a special education teacher, I rarely felt respected as a teacher by the other teachers. I would often hear from them, 'We don't even really know what you guys do.' It took awhile to realize, but this wasn't a knock on us as resource teachers. They truly just didn't understand what we did."

Allison Kappmeyer-Sofia, a special education teacher in Northern California, said in a previous position she felt she had to constantly advocate for her students who have severe disabilities that weren't well understood.

She explained: "I felt I had to validate everything: Why was the student on the computer while no other students were (earned reinforcement); why did the students get to eat throughout the day (very limited diets and especially grumpy when hungry); why a student needed to be taken to the restroom, not just sent there (student safety and respect for their dignity). This all shows a lack of understanding by teachers, administration, parents, and even district-level special education staff."

The education field has been sounding the alarm for years about special educators leaving the field, and the declining number of candidates who want to enter it. The shortages are not evenly spread: Urban areas, rural areas, and schools for students with severe disabilities face the largest shortfalls.

While the number of students with disabilities has been going down—by about 1 percent between 2006 and 2016—the drop in the number of special education teachers has been much sharper. The Education Week Research Center found that in 2016, the most recent year for which complete federal statistics are available, there were about 348,000 special education teachers for 5.9 million students ages 6-21 with disabilities in the United States. The student-teacher ratio has risen from 14 students per teacher in 2006 to 17 students per teacher in 2016.

### **Juggling Competing Demands**

And as they work with increasing numbers of students, special educators are required to navigate an abundance of paperwork, driven by federal, state, and local requirements stemming from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. They also often have to navigate weighty administrative responsibilities, along with tricky peer-to-peer relationships with principals and with general education teachers.

"They get into teaching to teach, and they don't always have an opportunity to do that," said Elizabeth Bettini, an assistant professor of special education at Boston University. Bettini, a former special educator, has written several research papers about special educators' working conditions. "The truth is that there are many other responsibilities that take up their time."

On average, she said, these teachers are spending about a third of their time on instruction, with administrative and supervisory tasks taking up the rest of it.

And the job itself can vary dramatically. Although all teachers have to deal with different student needs, those in regular education know that their primary job is to cover their curriculum. In contrast, special educators may be working alongside general educators to support learning, or tasked with providing small-group instruction, or overseeing students in a resource-room environment where they're responsible for teaching all subjects.

Nathan Jones, also an assistant professor of special education at Boston University, explained how this variability played a role in his research. As part of the project testing a teacher-evaluation instrument, Jones and his colleagues recorded 80 special educators at work in the classroom for a year.

"No two special education teachers' daily roles looked the same," he said—which was a challenge, because they were trying to draw out what a "typical" day looked like for these educators.

So how can school and central-office administrators grapple with these problems?

One way is through mentorship, particularly of early-career special educators.

Lucinda Sanchez, the associate superintendent for special education for Albuquerque schools in New Mexico, said her district has seen some success through a two-year mentorship program for special educators entering the field via alternative-licensure programs.

"We have support teachers who can go out and help them in classroom settings. We do a lot of talking about strategies, how they're feeling in their classrooms, the challenges they're facing," she said.

The support teachers are also meant to give the educators someone to talk to who is not in the position of evaluating them, as a principal would be.

And Sanchez said she knows firsthand how that's needed. As an overwhelmed first-year teacher, "I walked in the door and thought, 'What a big mistake I've made,' " she said. Student teaching offers some experience, but "when you see 28 personalities, with all those different needs, it's hard to put all those theories into practice."

## **Forging Connections**

School leaders can also make special efforts to keep special educators connected to other teachers in their school. Lori Lacks and Heather Andersen, both special education teachers at Foster Elementary School in Hingham, Mass., praised their principal for creating a planning schedule that ensures they have prescheduled time to talk to their general education peers about student needs.

Prior to that schedule change, the connection between the teachers had been a little strained, Lacks said.

"The [regular classroom] teachers felt like they were not being supported" by the special educators, Lacks said. "We didn't have the time to connect with them." The new planning schedule "allows us to have that time, and that has opened the lines of communication."

Andersen said special educators sometimes can end up isolating themselves; for example, the special education teachers at her school used to eat lunch together. The principal encouraged them to eat with the general education teachers working with students on the same grade level.

The special educator's job, just like teaching in general, will never be easy, said James LaBillois, a former school psychologist who is now an assistant superintendent of schools in the Hingham, Mass., school system, where Lacks and Andersen teach. But tuned-in administrators and principals can make some parts of the position less burdensome, he said.

"I've always said that special ed. teachers are like my Navy SEALs," or special-operations forces, he said. "There's something unique that they do that nobody else can do. They manage everything from after-school groups, to helping kids getting off the bus, to getting work done. They need a lot of support to be able to do that effectively."

*Research Analyst Linda Ouyang contributed to this report.*

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