

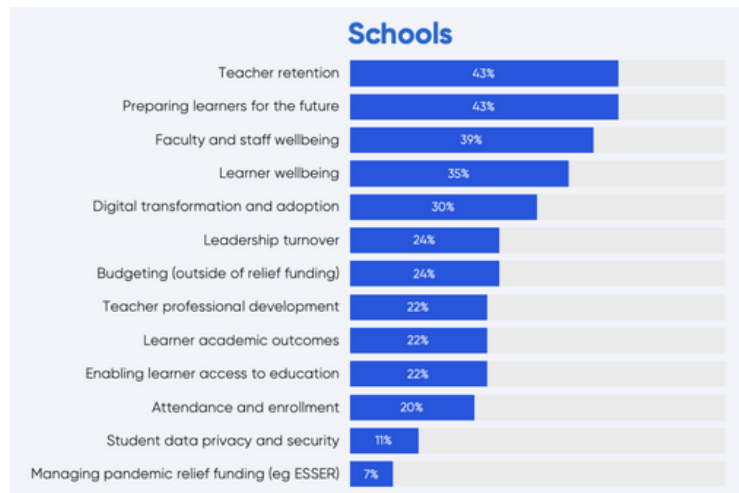


EDUCATION MODIFIED

# SPECIAL ED STAFF TURNOVER: A PRIMER FOR SUPERINTENDENTS



Special education teachers work in a challenging and often high-stress environment that requires patience, flexibility, and compassion. These teachers work with students who have a wide range of needs, including learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and physical disabilities. Unfortunately, this challenging work can take a toll on teachers, and many special education teachers experience burnout. Burnout leads teachers to leave the profession, which has been happening in droves since the pandemic. According to the Wall Street Journal, 300,000 teachers left the field between Feb 2020 and May 2022<sup>1</sup>. A recent national survey from HolonIQ showed that teacher retention is the number one challenge facing K12 district administrators<sup>2</sup>.



## Issues Leading to Burnout Among Special Education Teachers

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged and excessive stress. Burnout can affect anyone, but it is particularly common among special education teachers. This is a “crisis of epic proportions” according to John Isenberg, Executive Director of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education<sup>3</sup>. There are several causes of burnout among special education teachers, including:

- **High workload:** Special education teachers often have a higher workload than regular education teachers. They must develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each student, attend meetings with parents and other professionals, and provide ongoing support and accommodations for their students. This workload can be overwhelming, especially when combined with the other demands of teaching, such as lesson planning and grading.
- **Challenging behaviors:** Students in special education often have challenging behaviors that require a high level of patience and skill to manage. These behaviors can be disruptive and emotionally draining, especially when they occur frequently or are particularly severe. Special education teachers must also navigate the complex dynamics of working with students with a range of disabilities, which can be stressful and overwhelming.

<sup>1</sup> [www.wsj.com/articles/schools-out-for-summer-and-many-teachers-are-calling-it-quits-11655732689](https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-out-for-summer-and-many-teachers-are-calling-it-quits-11655732689)

<sup>2</sup> HolonIQ Global K12 Network Survey, January 2023

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.k12dive.com/news/States-tackle-special-educator-shortage/640925/>

- **Lack of support:** Special education teachers may feel isolated and unsupported, particularly if they work in a school where there are few other special education teachers or if they are the only special education teacher in their grade or subject area. This can make it difficult for them to get the support they need to manage the demands of their job and cope with the stress of working with students with complex needs.

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*“It’s a part of a continuum of special education being treated as secondary,” says Lauren Morando Rhim, executive director of the Center for Learner Equity, which advocates for children with disabilities. “All teachers work hard, but absent a sense of being part of a community, or considered central to the community, the paperwork burden and the challenges of their job just make it unfulfilling and unsustainable” to teach special ed.*

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Source: [Yes, There's a Shortage of Special Education Teachers. And That's Nothing New](#)

- **Emotional labor:** Special education teachers are often required to provide emotional support to their students and their families. This can involve managing challenging behaviors, providing comfort and reassurance to students who are struggling, and working closely with parents and other professionals to develop strategies for supporting students. This emotional labor can be draining and emotionally exhausting, particularly when combined with the other demands of teaching.
- **Limited resources:** Special education teachers may face limited resources, including funding, staffing, and access to specialized equipment and technology. This can make it difficult for them to provide the level of support that their students need, leading to frustration and burnout.

## What Superintendents Can Do to Reduce Special Ed Teacher Turnover

While some of the causes of SPED burnout are difficult to change, several of them can and should be addressed by providing teachers with the support and resources they need, reducing their workload, and promoting a culture of self-care and well-being. Let’s briefly take a look at each of these.

- **Provide Support & Resources:** Teachers generally report that the quality of their professional support and development is poor. This is especially true in Special Education,

where both GenEd and SPED teachers require extra support. By providing teachers with an online bank of research-based teaching strategies tied directly to disability classifications, administrators can ensure that their staff have job-embedded support and resources available to them. Administrators should also provide practical, ongoing professional development to GenEd and SPED teachers focusing on their daily challenges of working with students with special needs. Examples could include sessions focused on Co-Teaching in an Inclusive Environment, Progress Monitoring & Data Analysis, or Managing Difficult Behaviors in the General Ed Classroom.

- Reduce SPED Staff Workload:** Administrators can significantly reduce staff workload by providing web-based tools that automate some of the required paperwork associated with Special Education. For example, tools exist that automatically pull key data from IEPs and provide that data for every student to teachers in a classroom dashboard. This eliminates hundreds of staff hours spent creating IEP summaries. Superintendents can also provide staff with web-based tools that make preparing for IEP meetings much more efficient, reducing workload and improving the quality of parent meetings.
- Promote a Culture of Self-Care & Wellbeing:** Investing in productivity tools for Special Education staff communicates to your staff that you value them as professionals and care about their emotional wellbeing. This creates a supportive culture that teachers want to be a part of and that they may feel they won't find in other districts. This can be an important competitive advantage in retaining and recruiting teachers to your district.

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*"EdMod is a game changer for all educators when servicing students who require support to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally."*

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Only by addressing these issues can we ensure that special education teachers are able to provide the highest level of support and care to their students without experiencing burnout. Reducing burnout leads to fewer teachers leaving your district and more teachers eager to join your district from other districts and organizations. For more information on ways to reduce Special Education staff burnout, please contact the team at Education Modified, a teacher founded organization focused on creating efficiencies in Special Education workflow and improving outcomes for teachers and students. Please reach out to us at [info@educationmodified.com](mailto:info@educationmodified.com).

<sup>4</sup>A sampling of titles offered by Education Modified: <https://educationmodified.com/professional-development/>