



Increase staff retention: What your special education teachers need from you this year

Retaining special education teachers is important because the district runs the risk of violating the IDEA if it has someone without the proper credentials educating students with disabilities due to staff shortages. The Every Student Succeeds Act requires that each local educational agency shall provide assurances that all teachers and paraprofessionals working in a program supported with funds under the act meet applicable state certification and licensure requirements, including any requirements for certification obtained through alternative routes to certification. [20 USC 6311](#) (g)(2)(J).

Teaching through the pandemic has been challenging for teachers, especially for teachers of students with disabilities as they try to amend their lessons to promote student engagement and implement needed student accommodations as called for in their IEPs and Section 504 plans.

Three special education teachers share how their directors have helped them out and what they appreciated from them during this unprecedented school year. Applying their insights could help with teacher retention in your district.

4 meaningful actions

1. Check in. "Having my supervisor check in has been helpful," said Kathryn Nieves Licwinko, a special education teacher in Sussex County, New Jersey. Licwinko said her special education director would say, "Hey, what's going on in your day?" so the director was aware of what was happening.

"That's been helpful for me," she said. "Knowing someone is there if I have an issue and to be able to say, 'This issue is happening, I need you to help resolve it.'"

2. Offer praise. The shifts between virtual and in-person learning over the past year have meant teachers have had to change their lessons plans to work in numerous learning environments.

"It's a lot more time consuming than you realize to prepare for online things," said John Watts, a special education teacher in Dumfries, Va. "Administrators really help when they have kudos."

3. Hold meetings to boost morale. "So many times not meeting physically in teaching ranks you lose your esprit de corps," Watts said. But teachers can burn out from attending numerous virtual meetings about cleaning, assessments, and other important topics. "That after a while gets very exhausting," he said. "We've just now been able to have an online meeting just for teachers to share how [everyone in the] room is doing." During these meetings, all the teachers are present, and they each share what's been good that week.

4. Perform small acts of kindness. It's often said that the smallest acts of kindness leave the biggest impacts, and that can be true for special education directors. Large, sweeping, high-level actions are important, but sometimes it's the small acts of kindness that your teachers will remember best.

For example, Special Education Teacher Cheryl Cunningham from Kansas City, Mo., remembers that her special education director provided face masks for school staff at the beginning of the year.

"The special education director ensured that my paraprofessional was able to secure a hotspot from her home computer to join our Zoom classes," she said. "She has also been in our school building to check on classroom lighting and student sensory needs. She has been very supportive during the pandemic and often reminds us to take care of ourselves and each other, share positive learning experiences, and continue to lift each other up."

See also:

- [Lessons in Leadership: Everything You Need to Successfully Maneuver Through the Challenges of Your New Role in a Post-COVID-19 Environment](#) presented by *Larry Brunson*
- [SmartStart: Qualifications of Special Education Teachers](#)
- [Recruit and Retain Special Educators With Real-Life Lessons From Local, District, and State Initiatives](#)

For more stories and guidance on this topic, access the [COVID-19 Roundup](#).

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March 16, 2021

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