



Office of the  
Washington  
State Auditor  
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# PERFORMANCE AUDIT

## Report Highlights

# Strategies to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Special Education Staff

Of the more than 1 million Washington students enrolled in K-12 education, almost 150,000 are eligible for special education services. Each eligible student receives an individualized education program that establishes the services the student is eligible to receive based upon specific needs and development goals. Special education services can include lessons to develop study or basic life skills, speech or physical therapy, behavior management, vocational education and travel training. Having an adequate and stable supply of qualified special education teachers and support staff is essential if the state is to assure quality instruction for these students and help them achieve educational goals.

Like most states, however, Washington reports shortages of qualified special education staff. This hampers school districts' ability to hire qualified teachers to fill special education vacancies. The shortfall also reflects the problem of retaining staff, as people leave special education for other public teaching roles or abandon the profession entirely. Either way, students with the most complex educational needs can be left without the properly trained staff to meet their needs. School districts are responsible for providing special education services to students, but Educational Service Districts (ESDs) and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) also play a key role. This audit identified strategies to help school districts improve recruitment and retention of special education staff. We also considered the challenges districts face in those efforts, and how districts might collaborate with OSPI and ESDs if they wish to implement or scale up recommended strategies.

## Washington lacks qualified special education staff, but does not know the full extent of the shortage and attrition in the field

Research studies and school districts report shortages of special education staff, particularly in rural and high-poverty districts. Inexperienced teachers and paraeducators are also common in special education settings. Moreover, attrition also reduces the supply of available, fully qualified teachers and staff. Washington's shortfall and high turnover in special education may be greater than studies suggest.

## School districts described multiple challenges they face in recruiting and retaining special education staff

Various factors can complicate school districts' recruitment and retention efforts, among them unfavorable working conditions – including heavy caseloads, administrative responsibilities and lack of leadership support. Districts that can pay higher wages, even within the same region, may better attract and retain qualified staff. The quality of preparation and mentorship programs can affect teacher preparedness for the job and lead to turnover. Finally, community factors also create barriers to recruitment and retention.

## School districts may be able to improve recruitment and retention practices but will need regional and statewide support to do so

We identified five areas of practice that can enhance school district efforts to recruit qualified special education teachers and support staff, and improve the likelihood districts will retain those they hire. These five areas are:

1. Create alternative pathways into the profession
2. Take advantage of newly reduced credentialing barriers
3. Provide financial incentives for special education roles
4. Promote manageable workloads
5. Establish supportive workplaces

## State Auditor's Conclusions

Special education is as complex a topic as it is a vital service. As a school board member early in my public service career, I can recall the very real challenges of identifying the wide range of special education services needed across the district. Today, legislators continue to work to ensure every child in Washington receives the maximum benefits of a public education. For example, a child with disabilities cannot reach their potential without the support of dedicated teachers, paraeducators, psychologists and others. Legislators expressed interest in identifying successful recruitment and retention strategies for special education staff. In this report, we review the approaches and successes of other states in attracting and retaining these frontline workers.

This performance audit also fits into a wider constellation of studies intended to address the interests of policy makers. In 2025, we plan to review the prevalence of disabilities requiring special education services across Washington. And in 2026, we plan to conduct a performance audit of the authorization, monitoring and investigation of non-public agencies that provide special education services.

Taken together with reviews that will be conducted by our colleagues, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, these special education reports will form a solid factual basis for ongoing improvements to special education in our state. We at the State Auditor's Office are proud to be part of that effort.

## Recommendations

This audit did not make formal recommendations to the school districts interviewed or other educational agencies mentioned in the report. However, we consider the audit results so broadly applicable that it is in the state's best interest for all school districts, educational service districts and OSPI to consider the strategies highlighted in this report.