



Retaining Personnel

ONGOING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Description

Ongoing professional learning is continuous, targeted development aimed at enhancing skills and practice among teachers, interventionists, educational support personnel, and related service providers. To increase the effectiveness of personnel, ongoing professional learning must be deeply embedded in their daily work.

Overview

When special education teachers begin their careers, they often think they **are given fewer professional learning opportunities to develop their capabilities** than their general education counterparts (Leko & Brownell, 2009; Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scott, & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Beliefs about **inadequate professional development are linked to high rates of special education teacher attrition** (Ondrasek et al., 2020). It is important to implement systems of ongoing professional learning, especially for special education teachers, to address challenges with retention. Schools that provide personnel with **access to professional learning materials** have a lower risk of attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Effective professional learning should build on knowledge obtained during initial induction and should continue throughout the career, providing personnel opportunities to gain new knowledge and enrich their current skills.

Many stakeholders have a role in supporting the ongoing professional learning of special educators, including State education agency (SEA) personnel, local education agency (LEA) personnel, and school leaders and administrators. **Administrators** can support ongoing professional learning by establishing comprehensive personnel evaluation systems (OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). When employers help employees improve their practice, employees feel valued and are therefore more likely to stay (Workman & Wixom, 2016). For schools, **the right teacher evaluation system can help to align professional development initiatives with educator goals** by tracking teacher progress and identifying learning needs (Workman & Wixom, 2016).

Research Findings

Research on special educator retention clearly shows that **intensive, ongoing professional learning experiences reduce turnover** among novice and midcareer educators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

- Special educators who report they intend to stay in the field **feel more support from their administrators** regarding their professional development than those who plan to leave (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).
- Professional learning is key for novice teachers, who are often **underprepared** for special education demands (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).
- **Collaborative learning communities are an effective means** of promoting ongoing professional learning. When educators participate in collaborative professional learning communities (PLCs) or communities of practice (CoPs), they report **both higher job satisfaction and improved student outcomes** (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Much of the research to date uses surveys or qualitative methodologies; thus, findings are oriented toward personnel perspectives. To determine features of ongoing professional learning within early childhood and K-12 education that lead to effective practice and outcomes, research should begin to incorporate more experimental designs. Additionally, researchers may elect to investigate how policy changes at the national, State, and local levels correlate with retention outcomes to better inform long-term solutions through policy.

Overview (Continued)

Effective evaluation systems focus on supporting personnel in their growth rather than on removing those who underperform (Workman & Wixom, 2016). Use of such systems **increases teachers' perceptions of administrative support and positively influences personnel retention** (CEEDAR Center, 2020; Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013). However, it is critical that evaluation systems consider the specific skills that differentiate special education and related service delivery from general education **methods to decrease the likelihood of misalignment between evaluation and ongoing professional development needs** (Morris-Mathews, Stark, Jones, Brownell, & Bell, 2021).

Exemplars

- [Rhode Island Professional Learning Standards \(RIPLS\)](#). The RIPLS provide specific descriptors to guide LEA and school leaders in improving professional learning for educators. The standards are designed to ensure professional development opportunities are of high quality, defined in the RIPLS as “a set of coherent learning experiences that are relevant, purposeful, systematic, and structured over a sustained period of time with the goal of improving and building upon educators’ practices and student outcomes.”
- [Virginia’s Pilot to Support First-Year Special Education Teachers](#). This program **improves teacher retention by offering free membership to the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)**, ongoing professional development, and access to professional learning materials for first-year special educators in the State of Virginia. Evidence of the effectiveness of this program is not yet available, but CEC has expanded the program to additional States.
- [The IRIS Center](#). This OSEP-funded center disseminates free professional development materials, research, and modules that can assist professional learning providers who deliver training services to education staff working in school settings. Additionally, the IRIS Center offers professional development certificates for teachers and a school and district platform to help school leaders organize and track their teachers’ ongoing professional learning activities.

(Additional exemplars can be found on the [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).)

Resource Spotlight

- [State Personnel Development Network’s Resource Library on Evidence-Based Professional Development](#). This collection of resources is used by many State Personnel Development Grant recipients as they develop, integrate, and evaluate ongoing professional learning. An observational checklist of high-quality professional development in education is available for download.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Critical Components for Success

(Lists are not sequential)

Setting the Stage

- Clearly define professional learning goals and objectives.
- Collect data in your school or district to determine specific professional learning needs and areas where personnel feel unprepared.
- Cross-reference data from personnel evaluations to determine areas in need of ongoing professional learning, including in relationship to evidence-based practice implementation.
- Determine methods for ongoing professional learning (e.g., in-person, online, self-paced, micro-credentialing).
- Select ongoing professional learning providers.
 - Consider if external providers should be established on an “vendor list” or otherwise recognized for their demonstration of high-quality professional learning.

Initial Start-Up

- Create a schedule for ongoing professional learning.
- Ensure personnel in your school and district are aware of development opportunities, including experiences that result in relicensure credits or other incentives.
- Implement professional learning opportunities for personnel at all levels and articulate a well-defined path for professional growth.
- Establish a clear connection between your professional learning initiative and personnel roles and responsibilities in your school or district.

Continuous Improvement

- Collect data on the efficacy of your professional development programs as a strategy to address retention challenges.
- Organize and track personnel progress, goals, and professional development activities.

Leveraging Successes

- Identify partners. State-level personnel, LEA personnel, and school leaders and administrators all play a crucial role in the development and implementation of professional learning programs.
- Share success stories.

Related Services

Evaluation and specific feedback are key for supporting personal growth. Professional development goals should directly align with personnel need. To follow the critical components for success and accurately **evaluate related service personnel** to provide substantial support in professional development, **leadership must understand the roles of each provider**. One strategy for supporting related service providers is to facilitate their involvement in relevant professional learning communities. This offers an opportunity for collaboration, which increases engagement, and gives them the ability to exercise agency in their professional growth. Professional learning communities positively influence retention by increasing intent to stay in the field overall (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013).

Early Childhood

Early childhood personnel who serve infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities require specific expertise related to the developmental age of the students they serve. **Professional development should be specialized** to reflect the unique nature and depth of information that will help personnel achieve success. Head Start provides a [series of resources](#) that outline necessary staff skills and competencies specific to various profiles, such as preschool classroom, infant/toddler classroom, family and disability services, home visitors, and support staff (ECLKC, 2020).

Critical Components for Success (Continued)

- Collaborate with other institutions that integrate professional learning into their retention initiatives to share lessons learned and areas for improvement.
- Determine the feasibility of sustaining and/or scaling up your professional learning programs.
- Develop guidance, resources, and tools.

Stakeholder Spotlight

- **Paraeducators.** Paraeducators who serve children with deafblindness are an example of a group of professionals who require targeted and unique professional development to meet role expectations. To support paraeducators with appropriate training, leadership must understand the skills required for success. As a starting point, leaders can refer to the [Specialty Set: Special Education Paraeducator Intervener for Individuals With Deafblindness \(PDBI\)](#) (CEC, 2015). For standards outlining expectations in other special education, related service, and early childhood roles, refer to the CEC collection of [Specialty Sets](#).

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