



# *Retaining Personnel* **SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS**

## **Description**

Educators are more likely to continue in the field when they experience positive working conditions (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). A supportive work environment is characterized by positive school climate, manageable demands placed on teachers, administrative social supports (e.g., clear role definitions, collaborative workplace culture), and administrative logistical benefits (e.g., planning time, curricular and professional development resources).

## **Overview**

Typically, school leaders are the primary agent responsible for establishing a supportive work environment for personnel serving infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities (OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). Despite their important role, special educators and related service providers are more likely than their general education counterparts to report feeling unsupported by administrators and unclear about job expectations (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Rock et al., 2016). Leaders can address these concerns by implementing a “service-leadership” approach. **A service-leader views their primary role as being responsible for ensuring their faculty have the support they need to serve all students** (OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). To create leaders who take this approach, initial leadership preparation and ongoing professional development should center on equipping leaders with the necessary skills to support personnel. Principals, for example, should receive ongoing training to successfully demonstrate staff value through one-on-one interactions and to facilitate collaboration among personnel (OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020).

A conceptual framework devised by Bettini and colleagues (2016) shows how **administrator support and school climate influence the instructional quality** of personnel serving students with disabilities by facilitating opportunities to learn, to plan, and to teach. Administrators can ensure these opportunities by **providing material resources, planning time, instructional grouping, instructional time, and collegial support** (Bettini et al., 2016).

## **Research Findings**

For decades, research on retention has focused on work environment conditions experienced by personnel serving students with disabilities (Zabel & Zabel, 1982).

Recent research on supportive work environments has found the following:

- Creating a **positive school environment** through administrative support (e.g., clarifying roles, assisting with paperwork, providing ongoing professional learning) **correlates with reductions in personnel turnover** (Arundel, 2020).
- **Lower faculty attrition rates** are associated with principals who serve as facilitators and collaborators and who create shared ownership (Learning Policy Institute, 2017).
- Multiple studies have shown that in high-poverty schools, **personnel’s positive perception of their school leaders** was a dominant factor in their decision to remain in their school (Learning Policy Institute, 2017).
- A school is more likely to effectively reach organizational goals when personnel positively rate working conditions and indicate they **feel supported by both the school and the community** (Billingsley et al., 2020).
- When **administrators understand personnel’s roles and orient school structures** (e.g., schedules, curricular resources, and social supports) **around those roles**, educators and **students with disabilities benefit** by improved academic outcomes (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

## Overview (Continued)

Additionally, school leaders can establish positive work environments by supporting and rewarding **effective instruction and use of evidence-based practice** (Billingsley, Bettini, Mathews, & McLeskey, 2020). Leaders also can advocate for and later offer **ongoing professional learning that supports personnel in meeting their individual needs** within the work environment (Stark, McGhee, & Jimerson, 2017). Finally, leaders should implement strategies that promote **staff well-being**. These may include **mental health supports** (e.g., adult social-emotional learning, daily mindfulness routines), encouraging **collaboration**, and **reducing workloads** associated with paperwork and other noninstructional tasks (Billingsley et al., 2020; Holt, Wang, & Gershenson, 2020).

## Research Findings (Continued)

Research has also posited that supportive work environments are especially critical for retaining a diverse workforce. For example, personnel of color are more likely to be retained when working in an environment in which **school leaders honor and are supportive of personnel's expression of their racial and ethnic identities** (Dixon, Griffin, & Teoh, 2019). Additional research has determined that Black educators are more likely to be retained in work environments where **teacher autonomy and their contributions are valued by leaders and colleagues** (Carver-Thomas, 2016; Evans & Leonard, 2013).

## Exemplars

- [A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#). A joint statement from the American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, School Social Work Association of America, National Association of School Resource Officers, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Association of Secondary School Principals outlines evidence-based policies and practices for improving school safety and increasing access to mental health supports for children and youth. The framework includes components related to improving staffing ratios, providing ongoing professional learning, ensuring staff have time for planning and problem-solving, and engaging families and communities.

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

## Resource Spotlight

- [National Center on Safe Support Learning Environments \(NCSSLE\)](#). NCSSLE offers information and technical assistance to States, districts, schools, institutions of higher education, and communities focused on improving school climate and conditions for learning. NCSSLE's [School Climate Resource Package](#) includes a variety of resources to meet a range of needs that stakeholders interested in improving school climate might have.
- [Educator Resilience and Trauma-Informed Self-Care: Self-Assessment and Planning Tool](#). The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders released this resource in April 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The resource includes a self-care self-assessment with key strategies for fostering resilience and a self-care planning tool to assist educators in identifying areas of strength and growth related to self-care and the development of self-care plans.
- [Module on Teacher Retention for Special Educators](#). The OSEP-funded IRIS Center offers a module for school administrators who seek to support personnel serving students with disabilities and increase their retention. This module includes a variety of resources, research takeaways, and practical tips centered on the importance of building positive work environments for educators to support retention. Additionally, this module offers exemplars and resources related to establishing successful work environments through strong mentoring and induction programs as well as tips and resources on how to facilitate effective ongoing professional development for all personnel.

# KEY IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

## Critical Components for Success

*(Lists are not sequential)*

### Setting the Stage

- School leaders identify measures for assessing the work environment, including perceptions of administrative support, school climate, and manageable workloads.
- School leaders reflect on the roles of all faculty members in the school building and ensure that all roles are clearly defined.
- School leaders identify areas in which related service personnel can demonstrate their expertise and increase their visibility within the school community.
- School leaders clearly define school improvement goals and include teachers and related service providers in the process to establish a shared vision.
- Local education agency (LEA) and State education agency (SEA) personnel analyze current policy related to demands placed upon educators, including paperwork requirements and caseloads.
- LEAs establish a system for collecting data on personnel perceptions of working conditions, school climate and culture, and supports needed.
- The SEA develops a system for LEAs to communicate data related to personnel perceptions of their work environment back to the State.
- The SEA locates funding sources (e.g., School Climate Transformation Grants, ESSA, Title II) to incentivize LEA and school collaboration around establishing supportive work environments.

### Initial Start-Up

- School leaders collect survey evidence and have conversations with faculty regarding their perceptions of administrative support, school climate, and manageable workloads.
- School leaders identify gaps in the above areas and collaboratively work with all faculty to discuss how these gaps can be addressed.
- School leaders select criteria to determine whether the above areas are being successfully supported.
- School leaders create a regular schedule for assessing personnel perceptions.
- School leaders ensure that preparation program faculty and preservice personnel completing their clinical experiences are involved in the data collection.
- School leaders collaborate with organizations and relevant parties to ensure personnel have an opportunity to voice their concerns and influence decisions at all levels.

## Related Services

As recent trends have seen increasing rates of inclusion in general education settings for students with disabilities (Williamson et al., 2020), personnel must be supported to collaborate across settings to ensure the needs of students with disabilities are met. This is an important role for related service providers, as they work with students across a variety of settings. Yet, these professionals often report feeling isolated from their peers (OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). School leaders must **establish environments that encourage connections between related service providers and their colleagues**. As role ambiguity within a school environment greatly contributes to personnel attrition, facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration may provide needed role clarification, ensuring students' needs are met in the most efficient way possible (Jones, Young, & Frank, 2013).

Additionally, school and LEA leaders should **honor related service personnel as experts** by including them on leadership teams and by recognizing the role they can play in the ongoing professional learning of their colleagues.

## Critical Components for Success (Continued)

### Continuous Improvement

- School leaders collect personnel attrition and retention data at the end of the school year and determine if efforts to establish a supportive work environment have had an impact on retention.
- After data are collected and reported, school, LEA, and SEA leaders convene to discuss any policy or funding changes needed to enhance work environments.
- School leaders collect data on the efficacy of these changes.
- School and district or leaders continue to collect data from their school or district to analyze teachers' perceptions of administrative support, school climate, and manageable workloads.
- Leaders continue to involve teachers in school improvement efforts (through direct consultation or by forming relevant teams) to foster feelings of ownership and to promote retention.

### Leveraging Successes

- Identify partners.
- Share success stories.
- Collaborate with other institutions that incorporate strategies to establish supportive work environments into their retention programs to share lessons learned and areas for improvement.
- Determine scale-up feasibility and sustainability of strategies.
- Develop guidance, resources, and tools.

## Early Childhood

To support personnel retention in early childhood fields, school or program-based leaders must establish supportive work environments (Gardner, Melnick, Meloy, & Barajas, 2019). Practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and professional organizations have all advocated for the role of school and program-based leaders in establishing a positive work environment for personnel serving infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities. In a 2015 position paper, the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children called for high-quality leaders to **establish collaborative organizational cultures and to advocate for the needs** of the early childhood special educators and early interventionists within these cultures (DEC, 2015).

## Stakeholder Spotlight

- **School Social Workers.** The role of the school social worker in establishing a supportive work environment for all individuals serving students with disabilities is often overlooked. Specifically, school social workers play a key role in two aspects of a supportive working environment, facilitating a positive school climate and ensuring that manageable demands are placed on all personnel. School social workers often play an important role in facilitating collaboration between school faculty to promote student mental health, which is a key factor in building a positive school climate. Additionally, school social workers are trained mental health professionals who can assist with mental health and behavioral concerns; provide positive behavioral, academic, and classroom support; and consult with teachers, parents, and administrators (SSWAA, n.d.). Leaders must both position school social workers as experts in these roles and allow their autonomy to ensure that teachers and other related service providers do not become overwhelmed by trying to take on these roles by themselves. Conversely, leaders must ensure that this does not result in the responsibility being placed solely on school social workers.
- **SEA and LEA Leaders.** While school leaders typically are the primary agents in developing a supportive work environment, State and local leaders also are key contributors (Arundel, 2020). State and local leaders can provide policy, fiscal, and other direct support to school leaders as they reduce faculty's caseloads and paperwork, support mental well-being, and encourage collaboration among personnel serving students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2020). This support to school leaders is essential to ensure that all personnel have supportive work environments in which they can serve students with disabilities. Additionally, changes made at the State or local policy and fiscal levels are essential to securing the long-term sustainability of initiatives aimed at supporting educator retention (Arundel, 2020; OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). More information on the retention of personnel serving students with disabilities as it relates to SEA and LEA leaders can be found on OSEP's [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).

# REFERENCES

- Arundel, K. (2020). *Recruit and retain special educators with real-life lessons from local, district, and state initiatives*. Horsham, PA: LRP Publications.
- Bettini, E. A., Crockett, J. B., Brownell, M. T., & Merrill, K. L. (2016). Relationships between working conditions and special educators' instruction. *Journal of Special Education, 50*(3), 178–190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466916644425>
- Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 89*(5), 697–744. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>
- Billingsley, B., Bettini, E., Mathews, H. M., & McLeskey, J. (2020). Improving working conditions to support special educators' effectiveness: A call for leadership. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 43*(1), 7–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406419880353>
- Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). *Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Diversifying Teaching Profession REPORT\\_0.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Diversifying_Teaching_Profession_REPORT_0.pdf)
- DEC (Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children). (2015). Leadership in early intervention and early childhood special education: Promoting high-quality leadership at all levels of the early intervention/early childhood special education service systems [Position statement]. Retrieved from <https://www.decdocs.org/position-statement-leadership>
- Dixon, R. D., Griffin, A. R., & Teoh, M. B. (2019). *If you listen, we will stay: Why teachers of color leave and how to disrupt teacher turnover*. Washington, DC: The Education Trust & Teach Plus. Retrieved from <https://edtrustmain.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/15140833/If-You-Listen-We-Will-Stay-Why-Teachers-of-Color-Leave-and-How-to-Disrupt-Teacher-Turnover-2019-September.pdf>
- Evans, B. R., & Leonard, J. (2013). Recruiting and retaining Black teachers to work in urban schools. *SAGE Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013502989>
- Gardner, M., Melnick, H., Meloy, B., & Barajas, J. (2019). *Promising models for preparing a diverse, high-quality early childhood workforce*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Early Educator Preparation REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Early_Educator_Preparation_REPORT.pdf)
- Holt, S. B., Wang, R., & Gershenson, S. (2020). *Stress test: Examining the evolution of teachers' mental health over time*. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/4rr0-k714>
- Jones, N. D., Youngs, P., & Frank, K. A. (2013). The role of school colleagues in shaping the commitment of novice special and general education teachers. *Exceptional Children, 79*(3), 1–19. Retrieved from <https://msu.edu/user/kenfrank/The%20Role%20of%20School%20colleagues%20in%20shaping%20commitment%20of%20novice%20special%20and%20general%20education%20teachers.pdf>
- Learning Policy Institute. (2017). *The role of principals in addressing teacher shortages* (Research brief). Palo Alto, CA: Author. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Role Principals Addressing Teacher Shortage BRIEF.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Role_Principals_Addressing_Teacher_Shortage_BRIEF.pdf)
- Mason-Williams, L., Bettini, E., Peyton, D., Harvey, A., Rosenberg, M., & Sindelar, P. T. (2020). Rethinking shortages in special education: Making good on the promise of an equal opportunity for students with disabilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 43*(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406419880352>

- OSEP Summit Retain Panel; Banerjea, P., DeWitt, J., Hines, R., Joseph, M., Smith, T., Morningstar, M., & VanderPloeg, L. (2020). Attract, Prepare, Retain: OSEP National Summit on Improving Effective Personnel for Children With Disabilities, Washington, DC. <https://osepideasthatwork.org/federal-resources-stakeholders/attract-prepare-retain-osep-national-summit-improving-effective-personnel-children-disabilities>.
- Rock, M. L., Spooner, F., Nagro, S., Vasquez, E., Dunn, C., Leko, M., ... Jones, J. L. (2016). 21st century change drivers: Considerations for constructing transformative models of special education teacher development. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 39*(2), 98–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406416640634>
- Stark, M. D., McGhee, M. W., & Jimerson, J. B. (2017). Reclaiming instructional supervision: Using solution-focused strategies to promote teacher development. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 12*(3), 215–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775116684895>
- SSWAA (School Social Work Association of America). (n.d.). *Role of school social worker*. Retrieved from <https://www.sswaa.org/school-social-work>
- Williamson, P., Hoppey, D., McLeskey, J., Bergmann, E., & Moore, H. (2020). Trends in LRE placement rates over the past 25 years. *Journal of Special Education, 53*(4), 236–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466919855052>
- Zabel, R. H., & Zabel, M. K. (1982). Factors in burnout among 5 teachers of exceptional children. *Exceptional Children, 49*(3), 261–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440298204900312>

---

This document was produced under U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) contract no. GS007F-347CA. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned on this website is intended or should be inferred.