



Retaining Personnel

PROFESSIONAL EMPOWERMENT

Description

Professional empowerment occurs when personnel perceive that their input and contributions positively impact organizational goals and outcomes and that they have the freedom to exercise agency over their own development by collaborating with colleagues and employing ownership over their individual professional growth (Harper, 2017; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019; OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020).

Overview

When employees feel valued, they are more likely to stay in their positions (OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). Personnel serving students with disabilities need to believe that their **efforts matter**, that their voices are heard, and that they have the **support and ability to exercise agency** over their own **professional growth** (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019; OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). To ensure that personnel see the positive impact of their efforts, leaders should **celebrate individual achievements** to illustrate the **direct connection between the work and the lives of the students** (Center on Education Policy, 2016; OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020).

Furthermore, **local education agency (LEA) and school leaders** are in an especially unique position to invite educators and related service providers to the table when **organizational goals** are discussed (Ladd, 2011; NEA, 2015). This gives personnel an opportunity to practice **self-advocacy**, feel heard by leadership, and see the connection between their **input and organizational decisions**. This also may positively impact the **quality of services** that students with disabilities receive. Additionally, special educators and related service personnel are the primary advocates for students with disabilities in a school setting (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013; Whitby, Marx, McIntire, & Wienke, 2013). By inviting educators and related service providers to the table, leaders **recognize them as experts in their content areas** and **honor their decisions** on how to best serve students with disabilities. This will have important implications for **student outcomes**, as personnel are thus empowered to **promote effective practice** for students with disabilities.

Research Findings

Research on teacher empowerment has found the following:

- There are positive implications for teacher retention when personnel believe they are **making meaningful contributions** to their schools.
 - Research has found that personnel and related service providers specifically want to **make a meaningful difference** in their student's lives and report that this is the **most rewarding part** of their work (Center on Education Policy, 2016).
- Schools that have a **culture of collective responsibility** among staff have higher rates of special education teacher retention (Billingsley et al., 2020; Conley & You, 2017).
- When administrators foster teacher empowerment, **understand the roles** of special education teachers, and **orient school structures** around the needs of the special educators, schools **retain these educators** and report **positive outcomes for students** with disabilities (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014).
- Administrators play an important role in facilitating **professional learning communities** within school structures. This collaboration **reduces feelings of role ambiguity** in special education teachers, which is important in retention efforts (Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Overview (Continued)

To increase retention, **leaders must support personnel decision-making** by ensuring staff have the resources, time, and freedom to exercise agency over their professional growth and work environments (Harper, 2017; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). Strategies to promote agency among all personnel include the facilitation of **collaborative learning environments** and the inclusion of both new and seasoned staff in the **development of professional learning programs** (Harper 2017; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013).

Research Findings (Continued)

Extensive research has found that using learning communities is one of the most promising practices for leaders to empower personnel. Professional learning communities positively influence retention by **increasing intent to stay** in the field overall and **fostering positive views of the school** itself (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013). When educators are given the opportunity to collaborate (study, practice, and research together), their **ability to innovate** and support each other increases (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Exemplars

- [California Instructional Leadership Corps \(ILC\) Project](#). This project at Stanford University fosters a professional development (PD) model for teachers in California, in which in-service practitioners establish and lead their own systems for PD. This is an example of teachers exercising professional independence to engage in meaningful learning with colleagues and actively address goals specific to the contexts in which they serve.
- [Midwest School Transformation Project](#). This project aims to empower teachers in several midwestern States to take a leading role in the transformation of their school environments during a 3-year period. Through this project, educators are supported by coaches and school leaders as they are empowered to take ownership of the practices, skills, and mindsets that their schools implement. The participating schools in this project vary in size, geography, student demographics, type of community, and governance (charter, district, private).
- [Hope Street Group Teacher Fellows Network](#). This initiative provides training and support to educators across five States to increase their understanding of and impact on policy decisions. Fellows represent general and special education across different LEAs, grade levels, and content areas. The fellows work collaboratively to create teacher-driven solutions to present to State education agency (SEA) policy makers and State board members.

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

KEY IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Critical Components for Success

Setting the Stage

- Seek expertise of experienced personnel to establish clear roles and expectations built on standards for professional practice.
- Ensure leaders understand the unique roles and expertise of special educators and related service providers, including their professional obligations to ethical practice.
- Define clear and concrete school improvement goals and include personnel in the process to establish a shared vision.
- Seek input from seasoned personnel to give them an opportunity to use their educational expertise to advocate for organizational decisions that are best for the students.
- Invite both new and seasoned personnel to the table when identifying and addressing professional development needs.

Initial Start-Up

- Collaborate with organizations and relevant parties to ensure personnel have an opportunity to voice their concerns and influence decisions at all levels (NEA, 2015).
- Promote personnel leadership opportunities and professional development, which are directly connected to increased teacher empowerment (Harper, 2017).
- Establish a committee of practitioners to pursue school, LEA, and SEA goals collaboratively (NEA, 2015).

Continuous Improvement

- Survey personnel to gain an understanding of the organization's culture. Is it collaborative? Do staff believe they have an impact on student outcomes? Do personnel feel heard by leadership?
- Collect data to analyze personnel perceptions of their influence on goals, initiatives, policies, and decisions.
- Continue to involve teachers in improvement efforts (through direct consultation or by forming workgroups) to foster feelings of ownership and to promote retention.
- Share success stories.
- Determine the scale-up feasibility and sustainability of teacher empowerment strategies.
- Develop guidance, resources, and tools.

Related Services

School personnel and leadership are not always equipped with a good understanding of related service roles or how they connect to the big picture. As school-based related service providers are often the **only members** of the school **faculty in their role**, they are often isolated from their peers (OSEP Summit Retain Panel, 2020). This must be addressed to facilitate successful collaboration. Administrators should deliberately **design systems** for related service providers to **receive the time and space** needed to effectively **collaborate with special and general education** faculty.

Additionally, related service providers often report **lack of autonomy** as a primary factor leading to attrition (Public Policy Associates et al., 2020). Leaders and other school personnel must empower related service providers to build autonomy and position them as the **foremost experts** in the school **in their content area**. A 2019 survey of nearly 8,000 related service providers in Ohio found that **decision-making ability** was an important factor in respondents' intentions to stay in the field (ODE, 2019).

Early Childhood

As early childhood professionals and early interventionists serve students with disabilities in a wide variety of settings, professional empowerment **must be approached differently** than it is in K–12 contexts. While early childhood providers play an extremely **active role in advocating** for the needs of infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities, they also serve as **advocates for the families and caretakers** of these students (OSEP Symposium, 2019). In their role of **liaison to families and caretakers**, early childhood and early intervention professionals must be empowered as expert decision makers. Positioning how the expertise of early childhood and early intervention providers is presented to families and caretakers is the **responsibility of educational leaders** and technical assistance providers, such as OSEP-funded Parent Centers. Parent Center staff must consistently **honor the knowledge and skills of early educators** while working with families of infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities. Moreover, to improve the retention of personnel, educational leaders must continue to **empower early childhood professionals** in educational settings as well.

Stakeholder Spotlight

- **Preparation Program Faculty.** Preparation program faculty are often overlooked for the important role that they play in the empowerment of personnel serving students with disabilities. While professional empowerment often begins once an educator enters the profession, preparation program faculty can begin the process of positioning personnel as self-advocates during preservice. Preparation program faculty must build candidate autonomy and develop educators' confidence in their expertise. This must not only occur in course content but also should be embedded in candidates' clinical experiences. As candidates build these skills during their clinical experiences, faculty must establish lines of communication with candidates' field placements to receive feedback on their self-advocacy skills. As faculty support candidates in gaining content expertise through knowledge and use of evidence-based practices, they must help the candidates understand their roles, how to communicate their learned expertise to school leaders, and how to effectively advocate for the needs of their students. More information on the role of preparation program faculty in retaining teachers can be found on OSEP's [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).

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