

The Working Conditions Checklist for Special Education Retention

Five research-based conditions that predict whether special educators stay.

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A three-decade research review (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019) found retention comes down to five working conditions. Use this with your leadership team to see where each one stands today. Bolded items marked with an **asterisk (*)** flag the most direct impact on students with disabilities.

1. Administrative Support

Strongest predictor of intent to stay.

- ☐ Standing leadership meeting with special education staff, separate from IEP logistics
- ☐ Protected planning time built into the whole school schedule
- ☐ Special educators included in school-wide decisions
- ☐ **Leadership reviews Individualized Education Program (IEP) quality, not just submission deadlines ***

2. Caseload & Paperwork

Workload is a staffing decision, not a fixed cost.

- ☐ Caseloads assigned by student need, not convenience
- ☐ No educator managing more grade levels than the schedule supports
- ☐ Compliance deadlines spread across the year, not clustered
- ☐ **A shared system (template, tracker, drafting tool) cuts paperwork time ***

3. Preparation & Training

Underprepared teachers leave faster.

- ☐ Ongoing refreshers on IEP quality, specialized instruction, and special education law for every educator
- ☐ New special educators paired with an experienced mentor
- ☐ **General education teachers trained on supporting diverse learners too ***

4. Professional Isolation

Isolation collapses support onto a few people.

- ☐ Protected time for peer collaboration or co-planning
- ☐ Co-teaching pairs share a common planning period
- ☐ **Special educators sit on cross-department or grade-level teams ***

5. Role Clarity

Unclear roles default to the special educator.

- ☐ Written ownership for each step of the IEP process
- ☐ Shared responsibility for outcomes, agreed on by both general and special education staff
- ☐ **New staff get a clear map of decision rights ***

Turn this into a plan

If several boxes stayed unchecked, that's useful information, not a verdict. Start with the domain where your team has the least in place.

ABC's THRIVE Academy offers three short, self-paced courses on IEP quality, specialized instruction, and special education law.

Book a Free Consultation with Sarah Sandelius, pick a time, no forms.

Source: Billingsley, B. S., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special Education Teacher Attrition, Retention, and Mobility: A Systematic Review of the Literature. The Ability Challenge | theabilitychallenge.org