



STRATEGY BRIEF:

Retention of English as a Second Language and Special Education Teachers

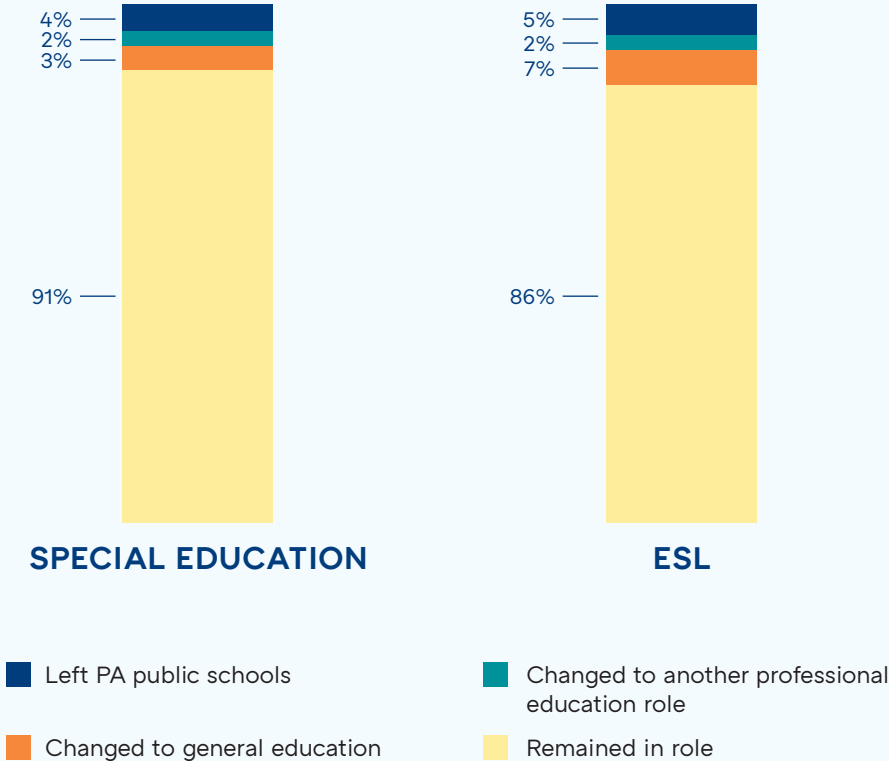
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School and Local Education Agency (LEA) leaders can use this brief to learn more about:

- Effective practices they can use to improve the retention of English as a Second Language (ESL) and special education teachers;
- How other LEAs have implemented strategies to address this challenge; and
- Resources to support this work in your local education agency.

To learn more about improving retention generally, see the Retention Guide.

RETENTION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND ESL TEACHERS IN PA, 2017-18 TO 2018-19:



Context

Teacher retention efforts must be intentional, differentiated and strategic to avoid the academic, financial and community costs of turnover.

As the numbers of English learners (ELs) continue to rise in US schools, schools and LEAs need increasing numbers of qualified (in content and pedagogy), culturally competent, and credentialed teachers prepared to teach ELs. Schools often face difficulty in recruiting, hiring and retaining quality teachers for English learners (ELs). Similarly, the need to provide high quality and inclusive instruction for students with special needs is straining current capacity. Additionally, ESL and special education teachers frequently leave these roles for general education positions.

Hard to staff areas, specifically ESL and special education, have higher levels of turnover. Too frequently, teachers move from ESL and special education roles to regular education positions, in addition to transferring to different schools/LEAs or leaving the profession. Reasons teachers may transfer to general education include a sense of isolation in their work, inadequate supports targeted for their specific roles, and the additional workload of compliance tasks. ¹Improving the retention of ESL and special education teachers requires strategies that address the complex nature of these roles.

Effective LEA policies & practices

1. Address the isolation that ESL and special education teachers can experience.

LEAs and schools that **boost relationships and collaborative professional interactions** will increase their employee retention overall. Productive relationships with colleagues are among teachers' most valued working conditions.¹ *Education Week* research found that, for special education teachers in particular, the **perception of colleague support** was a strong predictor of teacher retention.²

Leaders should facilitate strong relationships between ESL and special education teachers and the general education faculty and **provide scheduled, structured opportunities for collaborative** planning. Including ESL and special education teachers in grade level teams and professional learning opportunities can build a sense of community. Such steps will help increase ESL and special education teachers' sense of support and shared responsibility for their work in supporting the learning needs of English Learners (ELs) and/

¹ D. Carver-Thomas & L. Darling-Hammond. Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it. Aug. 2017 Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher_Turnover_REPORT.pdf

² A. Harper. "Special ed. teacher retention requires unique supports." Feb. 1, 2018. Education Dive. <https://www.educationdive.com/news/special-ed-teacher-retention-requires-unique-supports/516106/>

or students with disabilities and their families.³ Not all general education teachers understand the roles of special education or ESL teachers, who in turn often have to teach their colleagues about these roles. Additionally, for all school-based decisions and planning, make certain to include input and feedback from ESL and special education teachers throughout the process.

ESL and special education teachers are often the sole teacher, or one of the few teachers, holding that teaching role in a building. To reduce isolation and burnout, leaders can also design **opportunities for ESL and special education teachers to collaborate with role-alike colleagues** in other schools or local education agencies. For example, role-alike teachers can meet to discuss common challenges, provide input into local decisions, or determine how new policies or practice will affect their roles. Convening focus groups or surveying ESL and special education teachers can verify whether your efforts are resulting in improved connectedness.

RESOURCE FOR LEADERS:

*The **Educator Stay Survey** provides an example of a survey and questions that can be used to ask why educators stay in your or LEA. Teams can use this tool to gain insight into what retains employees.*

EXAMPLE IN ACTION:



*The principal at Foster Elementary School in the Hingham Public School District (MA) works to **keep special educators connected to general education peers**. Lori Lacks and Heather Andersen, both special education teachers, praised their principal for **creating a planning schedule that ensures they have prescheduled time** to talk to their general education peers about student needs. Prior to that schedule change, the connection between the teachers had been a little strained, Lacks said. “The [general education] teachers felt like they were not being supported” by the special educators, Lacks said. “We didn’t have the time to connect with them.” The new planning schedule “allows us to have that time, and that has opened the lines of communication.” To foster productive relationships between general and special educators, the principal also encouraged the special educators—who used to lunch together—to eat with the general education teachers working with students on the same grade level.⁴*

³ A. Thurston “What will it take to keep special education teachers?” Nov. 20, 2013. Boston University Today. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2013/what-will-it-take-to-keep-special-ed-teachers>

⁴ C.A. Samuels. “Why special educators really leave the classroom.” Jan. 24, 2018. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/01/24/why-special-educators-really-leave-the-classroom.html>

Reflective Questions:

- *What are the retention/attrition rates of ESL teachers, special education teachers, and other teachers in our LEA/school?*
- *What opportunities do we have or could we create for collaboration between ESL teachers, special education teachers, and other educators in the school?*

Provide additional support for special education teachers through trained paraprofessionals.

The expense of hiring and training paraprofessionals may be mitigated by the costs (academic and financial) of absenteeism and turnover among special education teachers who are over-burdened. Effective paraprofessionals **can take on some roles** that do not always require the classroom teacher and support the teacher's work with students. Allowing teachers to spend less time working on paperwork, supporting teachers in the implementation of individual behavior management plans, or providing student personal care assistance—and **more time on teaching**⁵—may increase retention⁶ and **improve student outcomes**.

For effective practices and exemplars for training paraprofessionals, see this brief.

Protect ESL/special education teachers from coverages that diminish their capacity and contribute to lowered morale.

When ESL or special education teachers are assigned to cover other assignments, it conveys a message that their role is expendable and not valued in the same way as regular education roles, leading to lower morale. Manage coverages, when necessary, in ways that do not disproportionately impact ESL or special education teachers; this reinforces the importance of their expertise and their roles.

2. Differentiate strategies to provide focused support for ESL and special education teachers at all career stages.

Welcome new teachers to the district's ESL and special education staff with orientation/induction specific to the role, including role-alike mentors (who will sometimes need to be

⁵ Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education Fact Sheet. 2013. U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. <https://education.ufl.edu/spense/files/2013/05/parasFinal.pdf>

⁶ D. Carver-Thomas & L. Darling-Hammond, 2017.

staff from other schools); detailed curricular and compliance expectations; and a clear explanation of how their role relates to the school system and other personnel.⁷ New teachers who are involved in meaningful mentoring and induction programs that allow the formation of both general education and specialized content collegial support and relationships may have lower rates of early career turnover.⁸

Ensure that principals are forming supportive relationships with **early and mid-career ESL and special education teachers**.⁹ The quality of teachers' relationships with the principal is a key factor in making plans to stay in their roles,¹⁰ yet specialist teachers often do not have as much access to the principal as those in general education. Again, focus groups and surveys can reveal what ESL and special educators are experiencing in your schools

Reflective Questions:

- *Are principals in our district aware of the importance of their relationship with ESL/special education teachers and its influence on retention of these key roles?*
- *What actions can principals take to build stronger relationships, and to elevate the role and contributions of ESL/special education teachers?*



RESOURCE FOR LEADERS:

Keeping Quality Teachers: The Art of Retaining General and Special Education Teachers includes a selfassessment (Appendix 2-1) for schools and districts on several areas affecting retention throughout special and general educators' careers.

⁷ K. Grayson. Leadership for ESL Teacher Recruitment and Retention. Nov. 2017. Intercultural Development Research Association. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/leadership-esl-teacher-recruitment-retention/>

⁸ A. Harper. Special Education Teacher Retention Requires Unique Supports. Feb. 2018. Education Dive. <https://www.educationdive.com/news/special-ed-teacher-retention-requires-unique-supports/516106/>

⁹ A. Harper, 2018.

¹⁰ Simon, N.S., and Moore Johnson, S. (2015). Teacher turnover in high-poverty schools: what we know and can do. *Teachers College Record*. 117(3): 1-36.; Burke, P.F., et al. (2013). Why do early career teachers choose to remain in the professional? The use of best-worst scaling to quantify factors. *International Journal of Educational Research*. 62: 259-268.

Throughout their careers, ESL and special education teachers will feel more capable and supported if they continue to learn and apply best practices for their students. This means consistently providing training opportunities differentiated for their roles.¹¹ Role-specific professional learning offers another opportunity for reducing isolation, as teachers can collaborate through trainings or professional learning communities with role-alike colleagues—perhaps across schools or LEAs. Analyze teacher feedback and local professional learning plans/policies to assess whether there is equitable access to professional learning between ESL/special educators and general educators. LEAs should also build general educators’ understanding of their responsibility for supporting the learning needs of ELs and students with disabilities.

Reflective Questions:

- *How do we decide when to involve ESL/special education teachers in professional learning with other teachers, and when to provide differentiated professional learning for specific roles?*
- *Are we striking the right balance? What do the teachers think?*

Teachers’ unions can be key allies in retention approaches for ESL and special education teachers by connecting them to peer groups, directing them to available resources and communicating to district representatives any issues or concerns that are brought to their attention.

Experienced and effective ESL and special education teachers are often an under-utilized resource in leadership roles and policy making. Opportunities for advancement and recognition for accomplishments are among the factors most likely to retain highly effective teachers.¹¹ Too often schools do not identify ESL and special education teachers for leadership roles or ask for their input. These teachers may be excluded because they are not able to be released to participate (i.e., coverage may not be available for specialized roles). Arranging for coverage can be a simple step toward improving their feeling of connectedness with the school community. Encourage leadership roles so that accomplished ESL and special

RESOURCE FOR LEADERS:

*For examples of various teacher leadership and decision-making roles, see **Public Impact’s teacher-leader role list.***

¹¹ K. Grayson, 2017.

education teachers have defined opportunities to share their professional knowledge and expertise with colleagues, highlighting their importance to school success.

EXAMPLE IN ACTION:



*At Vista International High School (VIHS), a diverse urban high school in Washington state, ELs make up nearly a third of the students. Lead by an EL facilitator, **EL teachers and students share their needs and perspectives to inform policy and practice at the school.** EL teachers are part of the VIHS literacy team and deeply involved in decision making about reading and writing instruction and assessment, making sure that general education colleagues are attentive to distinct needs of ELs in these areas. At faculty meetings, EL teachers lead discussions regarding specific strategies to best support ELs and help them thrive. This approach resulted in the school's mission being written to explicitly commit to supporting ELL students, thereby elevating the role of their teachers.¹²*

Additional resources for planning and implementation

Urban Schools Human Capital Academy offers tools and resources related to targeted retention, found in the open source HRinED:

- **Diagnosing Retention Challenges** is a tool that assists districts in diagnosing their key challenges related to retention. District teams in charge of developing retention strategies and principals can utilize this tool to identify gaps in their retention strategy and diagnose their key challenges related to retention.
- **Targeted Retention Strategies** is a set of strategies LEAs and school principals can use to improve retention of teachers in all roles, particularly of top performers. HR teams can review this list of ideas to identify new and proven strategies.

¹² F. Atesoglu Russel & K.S. Von Esch. Teacher leadership to support English language learners. March 2018. ASCD. <https://kappanonline.org/russell-teacher-leadership-support-english-language-learners/>



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