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School Leaders' Perceptions of Post-COVID-19 Recruiting and Retention of Special Education Teachers in a Local School District

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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MS, National Graduate School, 2004

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Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

School leaders in a local school district continue to struggle keeping their special education (SPED) positions appropriately staffed. The problem was that the inability to fill these large numbers of vacancies could adversely affect the quality of services SPED students receive and impact school personnel's ability to meet legal IEP compliance requirements. Guided by Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-way factor theories, the purpose of this qualitative study was to gain the perspectives of school and district leaders regarding difficulties in post-COVID-19 recruiting and retention of SPED teachers. A basic qualitative design was used to capture the insights of 13 school leaders from a local school district through semistructured interviews; a purposeful sampling process was used to select participants which encompassed both school administrators and district level leaders who support SPED teacher hiring. Emergent themes were identified through open coding and inductive analysis, and the findings were developed. The findings revealed that school leaders need to increase efforts to provide continued support and training for SPED, specifically related to work-related stressors including managing student behavior and compliance reporting. A white paper was created to provide the district's upper leadership with recommendations to boost SPED teacher retention through enhanced support and training of SPED teachers. This study may lead to positive social change by providing a structure that assists school leaders in improving the training and support of SPED teachers, therefore improving compliance with IDEA requirements, teachers' level of job satisfaction, and SPED teacher retention in schools.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The COVID-19 epidemic struck all spheres of education in the United States (Greer Koch, 2024). Schools had to make quick adjustments to ensure the continuity of instruction for students (DeMartino, 2021). The number of teacher vacancies and the level of disruption created throughout the pandemic period forced campus leaders to utilize available staff in unconventional ways to manage their daily operations (Koran, 2022). These realities have adversely impacted the number of individuals interested in pursuing teaching as a career with just above 10% of those showing an increased level of interest in the profession (Bill et al., 2022). School and district leaders must understand and know how to manage the challenges teachers face in the post-pandemic years to avoid more teacher losses (Gillani et al.., 2022).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have also affected the special education (SPED) landscape. In 2018–2019, the school year before the mandated pandemic school closures, nearly 90% of all states reported SPED teacher shortages (Reeves et al., 2021). SPED students entering classrooms after being at home during the pandemic period are less focused and active, contributing to more aggressive behaviors after developing new habits (Nordin et al., 2021). Teachers, especially those in SPED, felt the impact of the pandemic just as it was felt by professionals in the medical field (Cousik, 2022). Such reality requires more teacher patience and wisdom to manage these newly developed behaviors and situations (Nordin et al., 2021). The pandemic's many issues continue to

linger, and teachers, students, and families require additional support to adjust to the new normal (Cousik, 2022).

School districts have worked to increase teacher pay while lowering their certification standards (Koran, 2022). School districts employed unconventional methods like using parents and bus drivers to cover classrooms (Bauerlein & Koh, 2020). At the school level, leaders, in their struggle to find highly qualified candidates, have had to lower the bar for the type of talent they are searching for (Mason-Williams et al., 2020)

The partner district for this study is one of Houston's many suburban school districts. Every campus in the district has at least one type of SPED program, such as resource and in-class support, and most schools host at least one or more specialized unit programs. These programs are more restrictive learning environments, including social/behavioral, life-skills, autism, and cognitive/behavioral.

Data from the partner district's SPED and Human Resources departments indicated that, as of January 2023, more than a third of all SPED positions were vacant. Over 40% of the district’s SPED vacancies were teacher positions. These positions included resource, in-class support, and self-contained assignments. Nearly half of the vacancies were teacher support positions such as SPED teacher aides and similar support roles. Although the data may seem alarming as presented, simply looking at the numbers of vacancies would likely not give a clear picture of the extent of the problem and the many factors that could be playing a role (Dillard, 2023). This data only shows the number of unfilled positions and may not indicate the number of positions that could be

filled by individuals who are not yet fully certified or who hold the required credentials for their position (Dillard, 2023).

To manage this problem, principals in the partner district have resorted to using long-term substitute teachers and, in some cases, SPED instructional aides without a certified teacher present to deliver services to students as per their individualized educational plans (IEPs). School leaders have expressed their concerns in multiple leadership settings about the challenges special education vacancies pose to their ability to provide adequate services to students with disabilities, comply with federal requirements, and manage the day-to-day operations at their campuses.

The problem addressed by this study is the inability to fill these large numbers of vacancies, which could adversely affect the quality of services SPED students receive and impact on school personnel's ability to meet legal IEP compliance requirements.

Rationale

School leaders have struggled to maintain their teaching positions filled even during the best of periods (Bill et al., 2022). According to a recent survey by the National Education Association, the level of teacher desire or inclination towards a resignation or early retirement increased by nearly a third due to their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dillard, 2023). Before the pandemic, scholars predicted a national shortage of nearly 315,000 teachers by 2025 (Sutcher et al., 2016, as cited in Bill et al., 2022). The percentage of teachers who have decided to quit teaching has increased after the pandemic period (Bill et al., 2022). According to Bill et al. (2022), SPED teachers, like math and science teachers, are among the groups in the shortest supply (Bill et al., 2022).

Over the past 10 years, the proportion of teachers who lack the necessary qualifications has sharply increased, which has led to an increase in educational inequality (Dillard, 2023). This insufficiency results in children with the most severe needs being in the care of either new or inadequately prepared teachers (Freedberg & Harrington, 2017, as cited in Tilos, 2019). School leaders in the nation have to rely on these individuals as a primary choice for classroom coverage and delivering instruction to students (Bauerlein & Koh, 2020).

Audits related to the utilization of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief program (ESSR) funding have focused on how schools will implement systemic changes to ensure the long-term success of students with disabilities in the post-pandemic years (Stelitano et al., 2022). One aspect affecting a school's ability to achieve the goal above is the heavy shortage of special education teachers, which has been prevalent in the partner district, just as it has been for many districts nationwide. The 2022 School Pulse Panel by the National Council of Education Sciences and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicated that 52% of U.S. elementary schools report that it will be very or somewhat difficult to fill their special education teaching positions for the 2022–2023 academic year (McCormick, 2023). Gaining the perceptions of district-level and school leaders could inform the efforts put forth to overcome this ongoing challenge. Therefore, this study aimed to gain the perceptions of school leadership in finding and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic in the district.

Definition of Terms

COVID-19: The worldwide epidemic originated in Wuhan City, China, caused by the coronavirus or SARS-CoV-2 acute respiratory syndrome (Madabhavi et al., 2020).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A document that informs parents and guides educators on the abilities, learning goals, and assessment of SPED students as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA (Singh & Keese, 2020).

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A federal law enacted in 1994 that requires equitable access to free and high-quality education for students with disabilities, preparing them for a smoother transition to schooling and life (Singh & Keese, 2020).

Least restrictive environment (LRE): A requirement to provide instruction and other services to special education students with regular or general education students as much as their disability allows or to the maximum extent possible (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

Recruitment: Process in which employers attract, screen, interview, and ultimately hire new employees into a specific work sector (Schooley, 2024).

Retention: An organization's ability to keep its top employees by creating a work environment that decreases the chances of attrition (Gillis et al., n.d.).

Self-contained classroom: A learning setting in which a SPED student receives instruction for half or more of the daily schedule in the same classroom outside of general education (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

SPED inclusion: Adjustments to school processes and practices that allow schools to provide students with disabilities access to their education and ensure their maximum academic potential (Lamus de Rodriguez et al., 2024).

SPED resource: Learning setting in which SPED students receive extra and differentiated academic support outside of the general education classroom for a portion of their daily instructional schedule (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2024).

Significance of the Study

This study was significant since it filled a gap in practice in that school leaders at all levels will better understand the factors influencing recruitment and retaining teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in the SPED school setting. School leaders must prioritize strategies for the improved recruitment and retention, professional development, and support of individuals with the capacity or potential to become SPED teachers (Kamman et al., 2021). This study's findings could benefit school leaders by providing recommendations that will help them enhance teacher recruiting and retention practices, supporting teachers currently serving, and ensuring environments that are optimal for newly hired individuals. Keeping SPED vacancies fully staffed in every school district is critical to ensure schools meet IEP requirements and other aspects of SPED compliance and provide high-quality instruction to students with disabilities as per requirements of the IDEA. While long-term initiatives are needed to address the underlying causes of shortages, schools and districts must act quickly to implement comprehensive systemic remedies (Kamman et al., 2021).

Decreasing the number of current special education positions in the partner district could benefit other district and school-level stakeholders such as general education teachers, parents, community, and primarily, the students. Improved staffing of vacancies would result in the efficient utilization of teachers and other staff reducing the likelihood of increased class sizes and ensuring the optimization of campus daily operations. Grade-level teams and schools as a whole would be in a stronger position to increase student achievement if all classroom and SPED units are filled adequately.

A lack of certified and highly qualified in our schools hinders the ability of schools to provide students with their IEPs as required by IDEA (Peyton et al., 2021). On the contrary, with improved recruitment and retention, parents could be assured that their children would receive SPED services of higher quality and in accordance with IEP requirements. Communities benefit and thrive long-term when their neighborhood schools provide a better education to children. Unfortunately, some of the more economically disadvantaged community schools in the partner district have the highest percentages of SPED students and the highest percentage of SPED vacancies, giving this study even more significance.

Research Question

One research question serves as this qualitative study's catalyst. This question will provide data and insights into the perspectives of partner district leaders regarding the difficulties of post-pandemic recruiting and retention of SPED teachers. These insights along with related literature will lead to recommendations that will be published at the conclusion of this project study. District leaders will receive a white paper with all

information pertinent to the study and recommendations for improving recruiting and retention of SPED teachers.

It is critical that policymakers, district-level leadership, school leaders, and teacher preparation programs understand the perspectives of those responsible for recruiting and retaining teachers to increase the effectiveness in these efforts. The researcher asked the following question to determine how district and school leaders view the difficulties in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 school closures in March of 2020.

RQ1: Why do leaders in the district continue to face difficulties with recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic period?

Review of the Literature

The problem explored in this basic qualitative study was how the high number of SPED teacher vacancies in the partner district during the post-COVID-19 period may be adversely affecting compliance with IDEA requirements. An overview of literature around the study topic and its connection and interrelation to the available and related published research is found in this section. The section begins with information about the study's conceptual framework, followed by topics such as teacher recruiting and retention, recruiting and retention in SPED, COVID-19 and education, and leadership and its role in recruiting and retention.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study is grounded in Maslow's (1943) hierarchical needs and Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theories. These two theories focus on motivation from

different angles. The implications of Maslow's and Herzberg's theories suggest that individual needs vary and that a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors, as indicated by both theories, cannot be separated (Herzberg, 1966; Maslow, 1943). Both theories have a high degree of relatability to the reality of SPED teachers due to the changes and increased demands of their work during and after the pandemic.

Maslow's theory focuses on a hierarchy of five human needs (Shi & Lin, 2021). According to Shin and Lin (2021), these five categories or levels of need drive human behavior. The five categories in Maslow's pyramid are survival, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-realization (Shi & Lin, 2021). Herzberg's theory focuses on motivation and hygiene factors; two needs that impact employee motivation and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction at the workplace (Ibrahim et al., 2023). According to Büyükbeşe et al. (2023), job satisfaction is achieved through motivation factors, while job dissatisfaction is affected by hygiene factors. Examples of motivators include anything the employee sees as recognition, such as a job promotion, a salary raise, or workplace recognition (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Examples of hygiene factors were witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic when employers required their employees to wear facemasks, implement social distancing, asked them to work from home, and decreased their salaries and work hours, among other requirements (Büyükbeşe et al., 2023). According to studies, while job satisfaction plays a critical role in the retention of teachers, job dissatisfaction has a direct correlation to teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2007; Conley & You, 2017; Thornton et al., 2017, as cited in Göktürk et al., 2020). When organizations are effective in applying both factors, they increase the likelihood of keeping highly motivated employees who are

driven and focused on higher achievement and success (Ihensekhien & Joel Arimie, 2023).

Two-Factor Theory

Hygiene Factors. Dissatisfaction at the workplace could be the result of leaders not being aware of how hygiene factors could impact their employees. According to Bhatt et al. (2022), an organization could experience different levels of dissatisfaction in their employees if hygiene factors are not applied or considered. Bhatt (2022) This principle could also be applicable to teachers as school employees if their campus leaders are unaware of how hygiene factors affect their level of satisfaction while working at their schools. Bhatt (2022) emphasized the importance of focusing and prioritizing factors such as organizational policies, benefits for employees, a healthy culture and climate, and job security to ensure that employees are satisfied at the workplace. The same applies to special education teachers since they tend to face more obstacles and work-related challenges than other teachers and school staff. School leaders must be aware of hygiene factor application since their absence could play an adverse role in an already demanding school role such as SPED teachers. Not focusing on these factors could also lead to retention challenges, especially in hard-to-fill roles such as behavioral units and other self-contained settings.

Motivational Factors. Motivational factors focus on psychological and intrinsic needs and can increase employee satisfaction in the workplace (Bhatt et al., 2022). According to Herzberg (1966), motivators such as receiving a promotion at work or being recognized for good work performance could positively affect an employee's sense of

achievement and overall level of workplace satisfaction (Ibrahim et al., 2023). According to Bhatt et al. (2022), workplace satisfaction is a is a basic need for every worker, and organizations that prioritize motivational factors as the way to keep their employees satisfied will always be in a much better position to succeed than other organizations or competitors. The same is true in the educational setting. Schools that focus on motivational factors will have an edge over other schools, especially as it relates to employees assigned to the most challenging roles like SPED teachers. SPED teachers must remain highly motivated and satisfied with their work to perform their expected and challenging day-to-day duties. Examples of motivation factors are the following: growth or promotion opportunities, workplace recognition, work quality, and level of autonomy or authority (Bhatt et al., 2022).

Hierarchical Needs Theory

Maslow's theory consists of five types of human wants: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Bozyiğit, 2021). According to Rojas et al. (2023), Maslow's theory is organized by tiers or layers, which means they must be met in that same order. The first layer includes the most basic human survival needs, the physiological ones, include water, shelter, food, clothing, rest, and warmth (Bozyiğit, 2021). According to Bozyiğit (2021), if a physiological need is not met, a person could experience anxiety and tension. In the next layer of Maslow's pyramid are the human safety needs. Safety needs refer to the need of humans to feel stable, safe, and protected (Shi & Lin, 2021). An example of this in education could be teachers and students feeling protected at a campus due to well established procedures for managing or granting

building access to unauthorized personnel. According to McLeod (2018. as cited in Bozyiğit, 2021), humans need to experience a sense of constancy, order, and control in their lives. Once humans fulfill the first two levels of the pyramid, the third layer, the need for love and esteem, comes to the surface (Bozyiğit, 2021). The need for love and belonging refers to the need for humans to interrelate and seek affection from others (Shi & Lin, 2021). The fourth level in the pyramid is the need for self-esteem. According to Altymurat (2021), there are two types of self-esteem categories: (1) the need for mastery, liberty, self-assurance, maturity, and strength, and (2) the need for respect, status, and admiration. Lastly, the top level of the pyramid is the need for self-actualization. This top layer constitutes the desire of humans to capitalize on their talents and strengths to become the best version possible of themselves (Bozyiğit, 2021).

This study aimed to gain school leaders' perceptions in finding and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. The tenets of Herzberg's and Maslow's theories provide insight into what teachers in a post-pandemic era are facing or lacking that is playing a role in the number of special education vacancies in the partner district and across other school districts in the United States today.

Teacher Recruiting and Retention

The high rate of teachers leaving the profession is likely one of the most significant contributors to the shortages we experience in our schools today (Yates, 2025). Since 2010, the need for teachers has more than doubled, nearly quadrupling, despite the continuous rise in student enrollment (Dillard, 2023). According to the Learning Policy Institute (2021, as cited in Yates, 2025), there will be a shortage of

teachers of nearly 100,000 by 2025. The extent of the teacher shortage problem can vary by locality, job category, and certification requirements (Nguyen et al., 2022). When compared to other areas in education, special education continues to be among the most adversely impacted by teacher shortages (Dillard, 2023).

COVID-19 has made matters worse, increasing teacher shortages in the nation. Bauerlein and Koh (2020) stated that the pandemic has caused a wave of attrition, with teachers opting for early retirement, changing careers, and taking leave from work. Additionally, issues related to stress, mental health, and COVID-related worries contribute to increasing the desire for current teachers to leave the field (Gillani et al., 2022). Besides the impact of COVID in adding to teacher shortages, enrollment in teacher programs has decreased because of views that education is a lower-compensated field compared to others (Han et al., 2018, as cited in Peyton et al., 2020).

Workplace burnout correlates to teacher attrition in schools. A study indicated that at the beginning of the school year, SPED teachers already experience higher levels of burnout and exhaustion than regular teachers (Brunsting et al., 2021). The higher demands and requirements educators experienced during the period of school closures, which included shifting their traditional classroom environment for virtual instruction, made special education teachers feel as if their days at work were never-ending (Melloy & Murry, 2022). A survey of SPED teachers indicated that the lack of motivation, engagement, and focus from students, and the lack of support from parents and their schools, were problems they experienced on a consistent basis (Cousik, 2022). These circumstances add to the already existing levels of stress SPED teachers endure and

likely contribute to the shortages school leaders are witnessing during the post-pandemic years.

Nation school districts continue to struggle to ensure our classrooms are staffed adequately with the number of teachers needed (Bill et al., 2022). SPED is one of the areas, along with math and science, in which teacher shortages have been more prominent (Gershenson et al., 2021; Sutcher et al., 2019; as cited in Bill et al., 2022). Teacher shortages manifest the most in Western states and other lower socio-economic urban and suburban areas (U.S. Government Accountability Office and Nowicki, 2022). The above description meets the demographics and reality of this study's partner district. Students with the highest needs such as those who experience economic, language, and overall student achievement barriers are likely assigned to teachers who may not have the appropriate credentials or preparation to support them effectively (Dillard, 2023). The public's negative views about education and the well-known need of support for teachers could be adversely impacting school district efforts to effectively recruit and retain their teachers (GAO & Nowicki, 2022).

Recruiting and Retention in Special Education

The Great Recession around 2008 showed a significant increase in SPED teacher shortages, and since then, an increase in vacancies of almost 7% continues to impact the SPED landscape (Peyton et al., 2021). From 2005 to 2012, nearly 70,000 SPED teachers decreased, comparable to the numbers we had in the 1990s (Sindelar, 2019, as cited in Kamman et al., 2021). Most states reported that SPED showed more shortages than any other area in the field of education, with nearly 90% of schools in low-income area

schools unable to secure teachers with the necessary credentials (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, as cited in Burstein et al., 2023). Most states reported shortages in SPED teachers in the 2018-2019 school year, the year before the pandemic closures (U.S. Department of Education, 2019, as cited in Reeves et al., 2021). The shortage challenge still affects schools today, for which school districts are exploring and implementing strategies to improve their recruiting and retention efforts (Dillard, 2023).

The high number of vacancies today are the result of less individuals pursuing teaching as a career making it difficult to cover the high number of vacancies available (Dillard, 2023). Out of the near third of the SPED teachers who opt to remain, 28% report not receiving adequate support in their work with students (Cousik, 2022). As a result, school districts around the nation are in the position to have to hire applicants without the necessary credentials for the positions they occupy (Burstein et al., 2023).

The hiring of individuals who lack the preparation or requirements for a school SPED vacancy is not a new in education and has been a common practice for school leaders at all levels (Mason-Williams, 2019). According to Peyton et al. (2020), the number of students qualifying for SPED services is much higher than the number of fully certified teachers available for hiring and even serving in our schools currently. Due to the decline in SPED teacher availability, the number of students assigned to teachers, or what is known as caseloads, has steadily increased (Sindelar, 2019, as cited in Kamman et al., 2021). This reality burdens the ability of schools to provide these students with a free and adequate public education or FAPE (Peyton et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is also possible that children who could qualify for SPED services, especially those who have

not yet entered school, may end up not being identified due to the pandemic challenges (Stelitano et al., 2022).

The Extra Burdens of the SPED Teacher Role

SPED teachers are dedicated servants who are focused on bettering the lives of their students (Reeves et al., 2021). These individuals are extremely passionate about what they do and their roles supporting students with disabilities., However, the requirements that these roles entail are many. According to the Office of SPED Programs (2013, as cited in Hester et al., 2020), over half of SPED teachers spend more time on other requirements that do not involve working directly with their students, such as compliance related duties, IEP development, attending ARD meetings, planning for instruction, and other duties. As strategies for hiring the best candidates for new positions, Kamman et al. (2021) recommend looking for individuals who already have experience working in these settings and with these students. Although these individuals may have some experience working in SPED or similar settings, it is recommended that school leaders have a plan to continue developing their knowledge and skills through intentional PD while providing other supports (Kamman et al., 2021). Some highly recommended additional supports are providing support with IEP creation, assigning mentoring partners, and other supports related to the challenges these new teachers will face at the onset of their careers (McCormick, 2023). According to Burstein et al. (2023), the severe shortage of SPED teachers and the high proportion of inexperienced teachers lead to inadequate services for students with disabilities and a higher chance of these teachers quitting their jobs because they teach the most challenging students in the most

challenging communities. This reality makes these supports extremely vital, not only for novices but for all SPED teachers.

Teacher Preparation Programs

The lack of students joining teacher preparation programs has contributed to the shortages we see today. According to Aragon (2016, as cited in Kamman et al., 2021), from 2009 to 2013, there was a decline of 35% in SPED program students enrollment. The number of students pursuing certification was not nearly enough to meet the demand left by the number of teachers opting to retire or leaving the teaching profession, even prior to the pandemic period (Bauerlein & Koh, 2020). Conditions such as lack of support, lower compensation, lack of professional development opportunities, and others could be an incentive for teachers and prospective applicants to look at other possibilities outside of education (Dillard, 2023). There are plenty of other employment opportunities outside of schoolwork for individuals who still want to work with children but rather not have to deal with the levels of stress and many requirements of school-based positions McCormick, 2023). Instructional aides, social workers, therapists, and jobs in recreation are among these positions outside of traditional school roles (McCormick, 2023).

Those choosing to join the SPED field do so because of an innate passion to serve students with special needs (Reeves et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the number of individuals choosing SPED as a career continues to decrease at an alarming rate, with 340,000 fewer teacher preparation program enrollees from 2008 to 2016 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019, as cited in Reeves et al., 2021). Furthermore, half of those who begin a teaching career in SPED leave the field within the first five years of

employment (Billingsley, 2004, as cited in Hester et al., 2020). These realities, coupled with the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to SPED, make recruiting and retaining teachers a true challenge for school leaders. Notwithstanding, school leaders can create environments that provide prospective, new, and experienced SPED teachers with better work conditions, even though there are many factors beyond what they can control (McCormick, 2023).

Paraprofessionals as an Option

A viable option for school leaders in the absence of prospective candidates for their SPED positions is to tap into those paraprofessionals already serving at their schools. According to Kamman et al. (2021). These individuals not only know their students, schools, and communities but also understand the instructional strategies and curriculum used to support the needs of students in their units, and many of them already reside in the communities whose schools are located in (Kamman et al., 2021). Additionally, they likely already have the skillset and temperament needed to deal with children with disabilities, which are necessary skills to possess as a teacher (Kamman et al., 2021). Equally important is that these individuals are familiar with the expectations and operating procedures of the school they serve (Kamman et al., 2021). According to Tilos (2019), school leaders nationwide continue to encourage their campus paraprofessionals to become certified and fill the existing SPED vacancies in their schools. During the pandemic, many schools were not available as student teaching sites for prospective candidates which resulted in these individuals acquiring their experiences in other types of assignments (McDonald et al., 2021). Paraprofessionals already work in

the same settings they would work as teachers, a benefit not afforded to all prospective candidates.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Education

The COVID-19 outbreak began due to a virus outbreak in Wuhan, China, in the winter of 2019 (Madabhavi et al., 2020). This virus resulted in a worldwide pandemic, leading to a significant loss of human life on a global scale (Shereen et al., 2020). The pandemic posed challenges on individuals and every type of organization including schools (Mellow & Murry, 2022). The school closures in the spring of 2020 required a quick shift in how traditional instruction and services were delivered since millions of students had to continue their coursework from home via virtual instruction (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020). Schools faced many burdens due to the lack of available personnel and the need to pivot to a remote learning environment in just a few days (Lesh, 2020, as cited in Mellow & Murry, 2022). These challenges had a direct effect on the educational experience and the well-being of students and their families (Lesh, 2020, as cited in Mellow & Murry, 2022). Although teaching shortages have been an ongoing challenge and not exclusive to the pandemic, the challenges experienced during this period caused teachers to look and consider career possibilities outside of education (Dillard, 2023).

The pandemic adversely impacted school facilities due to a lack of maintenance, reduced budgets, increased achievement gaps, and teaching vacancies. (Kauffman et al., 2022). The most recently released data from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences showed that nearly 45% of public schools have teaching and other staff role openings. Of those public schools with at least one staff opening, 61% stated

that the COVID-19 pandemic was the cause of the vacancies (Greer Koch, 2024). The pandemic increased inequities by widening the gap between those with access to resources and money and those living in much more challenging circumstances. The challenges brought by the pandemic opened the existing equity gap between those with access to resources and financial stability and those living- a more difficult economic reality (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2022, as cited in Aquino & Scott, 2022). Teachers at all levels had to embrace alternative approaches and receive additional support to meet the demands and challenges posed by this period in our schools (DeMartino, 2021).

Full Online Instruction Period

During the spring of 2020, schools were required to quickly adjust and prepare for a new reality never experienced before. The required change from the traditional classroom environment to virtual instruction in a matter of days posed many challenges for teachers who not only would be delivering instruction in a new setting but also lacked the necessary resources to fulfill this expectation (McMurtrie, 2020, as cited in Aquino & Scott, 2022). High levels of stress were the result of their unpreparedness to set up working stations and continue their instruction remotely (Melloy & Murry, 2022). Not having the resources to teach in a remote setting caused teachers added stress and anxiety (Kauffman et al., 2022). Teachers without experience teaching in an online setting found the shift to emergency remote teaching challenging and painful despite their efforts and adeptness to acquire new knowledge and skillsets (Trust & Whalen, 2020, as cited in Woo et al., 2023). On top of the stress caused by preparing for a new school year, teachers without experience in virtual environments saw how teachers with more

experience also struggled with this new reality, and, therefore, they could not receive the expected support and mentoring they would typically receive from more seasoned teachers (Kauffman et al., 2022, as cited in Aquino & Scott, 2022).

Research conducted by Glessner and Johnson (2020) found that during the first two months after the required school closures, all teachers felt some level of stress and anxiety at some point due to the new expectations and requirements the shift to remote instruction posed. Their knowledge gaps, level of preparation, and the need to support students and families during this period were added stressors (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). This issues required teachers to spend long hours planning lessons, gathering resources for students to work from home, and equipping themselves to teach students virtually (Kauffman et al., 2022).

The Effect of Online Instruction on Students and Families. SPED students and their families experienced difficult challenges during the shift to remote instruction. Some of the obstacles encountered by both teachers and families during the school closure period included the need for technology equipment, access to Wi-Fi, lack of in-person support, and teacher fatigue from having to manage instruction both in-person and online once some students returned to schools (Jackson & Bowdon, as cited in Melloy & Murry, 2022). Before the pandemic, schools had already issued computers to students and integrated some technology software and programs for instruction and communication to enhance learning (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). Although some teachers adjusted quickly to the transition, there was still a significant proficiency gap with technology use and the ability of teachers to instruct students virtually (Kormos, 2018, as

cited in Glessner & Johnson, 2020). According to Jackson and Bowdon (2020), most districts expressed that offering services and instructional accommodations required to meet IDEA requirements during the period of remote teaching was much harder than at any other period.

The pandemic made it difficult for districts to work with families and community agencies and provide IEP accommodations, services, and other necessary supports for children with disabilities (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020). According to Asbury et al. (2021), parents expressed their struggles due to their children's higher need for support during the first two weeks of school closures. Some parents believe that their children needed more help during the first 2 weeks of school closures, according to research by Asbury et al. (2021). Children with disabilities experienced even steeper challenges during this period. Jackson and Bowdon (2020) found that most school districts found it challenging to meet the requirements of IDEA, such as implementing accommodations for students, complying with related services, providing the least restrictive environment, and complying with other requirements such as evaluations, IEP or ARD meetings and meeting IEP related deadlines. Other challenges expressed were the need for partnerships with the community, strategies for engaging families, and speech services for students (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020).

According to Jackson and Bowdon (2020), districts found it more challenging to interact with families and work with agency partners when providing remote instruction. In general, 57% of districts reported that interacting with families to assist with IEP needs during remote instruction was more or significantly more challenging. According to most

districts (55%), working with social services or other agency partners became more challenging while schools were closed (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020). According to Stelitano et al. (2022), many families are still obtaining compensation services to make up for the losses incurred by students earlier in the pandemic. Very few even know they meet the requirements (Stelitano et al., 2022).

Lack of Readiness. The shift into virtual learning and the challenges this period brought to education were partly due to the unpreparedness of schools to quickly recreate their learning environment to an unfamiliar one for most educators. Regarding SPED, Al-Mamari et al. (2021) suggest that leaders in SPED programs should be strategic in integrating e-learning and not only traditional teaching methodology, which includes providing targeted professional development to staff that meets the needs of a new era in education. Ensuring this level of preparation and readiness, not only for SPED teachers but for all teachers, could be critical in the occurrence of new events of the magnitude of COVID-19, where a shift to full online and virtual instruction is required once again.

Hybrid Instruction Period and Return to Full In-Person Instruction

During the 2020–2021 academic year, educational instruction was delivered through combination modalities, which included face-to-face, virtual, and dual-model instruction or hybrid (Gillani et al., 2022). In August 2021, school districts returned to in-person instruction after 15 months of providing instruction to students in a dual-instructional model (Gillani et al., 2022). Despite the implementation of safety measures, schools had to remain ready to shift to remote learning if required (Melloy & Murry, 2022). (Melloy & Murry, 2022).

Schools were already facing the reality of teachers who could not return to in-person instruction, those who returned and had to quarantine when exposed, and the acute challenge of finding enough substitute teachers to cover classes (Koran, 2022). The dire need for teachers who can fill available vacancies has left schools with no option but to alter their daily operations and use their available staff in unconventional ways (Koran, 2022). Ultimately, children are affected the most by the consequences of these realities.

The extreme quantity of learning loss that children endured was one of COVID-19's significant adverse effects. Hanover Research (2024) recommends strategies such as differentiation, collaborative learning, such as engaging in projects and group activities, and enrichment learning opportunities that include extra-curricular activities to combat the learning regression from students. Differentiated practices could include tailoring lessons and learning experiences by learning styles, ability levels, and linguistic proficiency (Hanover Research, 2024).

Undoubtedly, schools are still feeling the consequences of the pandemic. In addition to the issues arising from the first wave of COVID-19 closures, lockdowns, illnesses, and fatalities, schools still face much uncertainty during this period (Kauffman et al., 2022). The following section goes in-depth about the effects of the pandemic on SPED.

COVID-19 and SPED

In preparation for the shift to virtual learning, SPED teachers questioned how they could provide continuity of services to their students, what type of access students would have to technology, and, ultimately, how they would be able to fulfill IDEA requirements

in such an uncharted environment (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). Students with disabilities comprise a diverse group of people, ranging from those with mild learning disabilities to others with more severe impairments (Kauffman et al., 2022). School districts expressed how challenging it was for them to comply with federal requirements and deliver instruction and services to students when schools closed and instruction moved from a face-to-face to a virtual setting (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020).

Serving children with disabilities during remote instruction was one of the most challenging parts of teaching during COVID-19, even if widespread school closures presented districts with numerous logistical and pedagogical challenges (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020). The school shutdown prevented many children from receiving vital services necessary for their development, as most of these students received direct assistance from different specialists (Cousik, 2022). In-person instruction and methods cannot easily move to a virtual setting since online learning is significantly distinct (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). Children with disabilities frequently require education and services that are difficult to deliver digitally, such as physical therapy or guidance on dressing or eating, which many of them need (Kauffman et al., 2022). Although all students and teachers were adversely affected by the pandemic, SPED teachers had a significant share of added challenges (Cousik, 2022). Despite this, they had to find a way to deliver instruction in such a complex environment (Cousik, 2022).

Regarding parental support, teachers expressed the need for more support from parents, according to a study by Cousik (2022). According to Cousik (2022), teachers recommended ways parents can support children at home. Suggestions ranged from

ensuring they or other family members read to their children daily to ensuring they are abreast of their children's progress and performance at school (Cousik (2022). Unfortunately, families, especially those with children with special needs, face added obstacles due to their lack of experience and knowledge in dealing with their children's needs and the stressors stemming from dealing with the pandemic (Asbury et al., 2021). Asbury et al. (2021) state that these families' likelihood for dealing with stress and other mental health issues during COVID-19 was higher than for other families. Data indicates that parents have experienced even more stress (12% vs. 5%) and anxiety (44% vs. 25%) than children (Asbury et al., 2021). Regarding fear, distress, and low mood, the data is similar for parents and children (Asbury et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 disease's broad losses and the death of close relatives also impacted the mental and emotional health of children with disabilities and their families. According to data by Asbury et al. (2021), families of children with disabilities could experience more significant difficulties from these losses due to the challenges associated with meeting their children's needs. Further challenges arise since, for some children with severe disabilities, it is impossible to explain why these losses have happened (Asbury et al., 2021). Keeping the parents of SPED students informed about ways they can support their children at home is essential (Rababah et al., 2022). Unfortunately, many of these families did not receive such information and guidance from schools during the pandemic (Rababah et al., 2020).

Stelitano et al. (2022) found that teachers witnessed an increase in mental health needs from children on their return to the classroom. While it is true that smaller class

sizes can help struggling children receive more services and instruction, many of the students who would most benefit from this extra support were not going back to traditional classroom settings (Kauffman et al., 2022). There were trade-offs between in-person learning and their children's health for families of students with medical issues or more extensive support needs (Stelitano et al., 2022). Because of their experiences related to the pandemic, students, especially those receiving behavioral and emotional support, require trauma-informed support to succeed academically (Taylor, 2021, as cited in Melloy & Murry, 2022). Thus, special education teachers working with these students must continue prioritizing stress management since their heightened work requirements could lead to burnout (Brunsting et al., 2024).

Teachers continue dealing with many challenges today, including inconsistency in student attendance and unmotivated and disengaged students (Melloy & Murry, 2022). All of these could be drivers of stress and, ultimately, burnout. Most attrition research suggests that burnout is the primary factor in teachers' decision to leave the profession (Brunsting et al., 2014; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Shen et al., 2015, as cited in Hester et al., 2020). It is critical that leaders closely monitor all aspects of teachers' daily work, including workloads and other stressors, to ensure better retention, especially in the hardest-to-fill positions such as those in special education.

Leadership and its Role in Recruiting and Retention

The work of school leadership is essential for ensuring the retention of teachers and attracting high-quality candidates to their schools. When school leaders support their teachers, they increase their chances to retain them (Borman & Dowling, 2008, as cited in

Frahm & Cianca, 2021). According to Bauerlein and Koh (2020), the number of student teachers working on teacher certifications is not nearly enough to cover the number of vacancies left open by retiring teachers and those choosing to leave the profession for other reasons. Teachers identified the following three characteristics critical strong school leadership traits that, in turn, lead to lower turnover rates in schools: recognition of teachers as partners and contributors in the learning process, clear expectations and communication of a vision for high-quality teaching, and a focus on both student and teacher learning (Scallon et al., 2021). As strategies, Brunsting et al. (2024) advise school administrators to consider staff conversations or professional learning around goal setting, recognitions and spotlighting, and involvement in the school visioning process.

Special education teachers have a particularly challenging role in schools, making administrative support even more critical as it can prevent burnout (Bettini et al., 2017, as cited in Aldosiry, 2022). Hester et al. (2020) cited earlier research that links several factors to special education teacher burnout. These factors include the following: relationships with general education colleagues, workload management, and support from administrators (Mastropieri, 2001; Davis & Palladino, 2011; Gersten et al., 2001; Prather-Jones, 2011; as cited in Hester et al., 2020). Brunsting et al. (2024) advise school administrators to consider these strategies to alleviate the workload of special education teachers: reducing the number of assigned courses and grade levels and providing ample time for planning and preparation for courses and subjects they are responsible.

School administrators can employ a variety of strategies to lessen the adverse effects of a lack of qualified candidates on their school and students, including increasing

class sizes, hiring temporary substitute teachers, using teachers of lower standard quality, assigning non-specialists to teach subjects that are difficult to fill positions for, and changing the curriculum to cut down on the amount of time spent teaching difficult-to-fill subjects (Smithers & Robinson, 2000, as cited in Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2022). Special education shortages require leaders to look beyond these strategies because, as Garcia and Weiss (2020) stated, special education teachers must operate in all areas of the curriculum and serve students at all levels of proficiency and abilities. These realities may hurt the quality of education students receive (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2022).

The primary factor teachers consider when determining if to leave or stay in the school they serve is how they perceive their principal's ability to lead (Boyd et al., 2011; Ladd, 2011; Podolsky et al., 2016), as cited in Frahm & Cianca, 2021). According to Hester et al. (2020), teachers' mental and physical health and well-being are additional factors influencing their desire to continue in their teaching roles. Therefore, school leaders must have a good grasp of maintaining a positive school culture and creating a positive work environment for teachers since there is a correlation between the leader's ability to foster such working school environments and teacher attrition (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). Besides maintaining a positive school culture, Aldosiry (2022) states that higher administrative support levels lead to less stress, greater satisfaction, and more significant commitment and desire from teachers to remain in the classroom. Thus, supporting teachers should be a priority for all school leaders to ensure their retention and that those newly recruited and onboarded teachers remain in their positions once hired.

Implications

The results of this study have practical implications for school districts in the area in that they will inform them about the perspectives of school administrators regarding recruiting and retaining special education teachers in the region after the COVID-19 pandemic. The partner district, just like districts in the area, must find ways to address the ongoing challenge of vacant special education vacancies. School administrators can bring to light the difficulties they have been facing in recent years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic reality. According to Kamman et al. (2021), school districts must continue developing and supporting teachers to ensure their retention, especially those new to teaching. Preparation entities such as universities and alternate certification programs must continue working collaboratively with school districts to ensure those aspiring to become special education teachers can eventually obtain their credentials and fill school vacancies (Tilos, 2019).

This study's findings would inform the work of district and school leaders, human resources departments, and regional SPED teacher preparation programs, such as colleges and alternative certification programs. Additionally, stakeholders such as SPED students' parents, general education teachers, other school professionals, SPED students, and educational institutions outside of public education, such as private and charter schools, could benefit from the study. Partner district leaders, including human resources support staff, would have the ability to implement strategies at a larger scale to support campus leaders in their efforts to fill their allocated special education vacancies and ensure the retention of hired teachers. School leaders would benefit from learning the insights

related to the experiences of district-level and other campus leaders in their efforts to address the ongoing challenge of SPED vacancies in their schools. These insights could also inform curriculum revisions for universities and teacher preparation programs to increase the readiness of prospective special education teachers. Having a teacher in every special education classroom would benefit parents because their children would be better positioned to receive their IEP services exactly as prescribed. Teachers outside of special education could now rest assured that their assigned special education-identified students would receive their services on time and would not remain in their respective general education classrooms, as it is often the case when special education teachers or their substitute teachers are not available to provide resource and other outside of general education type services.

Summary

In this section, the topic of study is the challenge associated with recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic in one local school district. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the difficult challenge of ensuring the staffing of all or at least an adequate number of special education positions in the district with certified teachers. Even a few years after returning to in-person instruction from the 2019–2020 closing of schools, many positions remain unfilled in the study's partner district, especially for self-contained units. Regretfully, districts and schools with open SPED positions are often in a position where the only option to provide instruction and services to students is by hiring individuals who lack the appropriate credentials and experience (Kamman et al., 2021). These challenges force school leaders to have students with the

highest needs placed in classrooms with inexperienced and unqualified adults if even someone is available to cover (Freedberg & Harrington, 2017, as cited in Tilos, 2019).

This reality presents another challenge for school administrators: the struggle to stay compliant with meeting IEP requirements of students receiving special education services, especially now with an increasing number of students qualifying to receive services and many who remain waiting for evaluation for possible admission as special education students. Data from the district's Special Education and Human Resources Department indicated that more than a third of all districts' special education positions were vacant, and positions continue to increase as more students qualify for special education services.

The substantial number of vacancies has been a recurring topic of discussion during district-level meetings, principal PLC meetings, and district leaders' meetings. School administrators struggle to find ways to staff unfilled vacancies and ensure quality instruction and services for students in current special education caseloads. Therefore, this study aimed to gather school leaders' perspectives regarding their experiences with recruiting and retaining special education teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study results will inform the work of local school district leaders and teacher preparation programs regarding ways to recruit and retain highly qualified SPED teachers and ensure their students receive the services they are lawfully entitled to receive.

The Literature Review section in this chapter included information related to the study's conceptual framework and wove in the latest literature on teacher recruiting and retention, recruiting and retention in special education, the COVID-19 pandemic and its

effect on special education, and school leaders and their role in recruiting and retaining special education teachers. The following section will cover the study's methodology, which includes detailed information on the researcher's approach to conducting the study, collecting and analyzing the data, and arriving at the study's emerging themes.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

School districts have struggled to retain their teachers for decades, a problem even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Morton & Maresh, 2024). The pandemic only worsened matters since teachers were still required to provide the same quality of instruction in a much more difficult environment and demanding conditions (Morton & Maresh, 2024). This reality worsened the already ongoing challenge for schools of teachers deciding to leave the classroom. The pandemic and teacher attrition problem increased the reliance on underqualified teachers, especially in special education positions (Stelitano et al., 2022). Like other districts and school entities nationwide, the partner school district continues to grapple with difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers, resulting in many special education vacancies in most schools. Although COVID-19 impacted the whole educational system, the challenges in special education were even more significant (Stelitano et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, which have led to increased vacancies, special education teachers have continued doing their very best to provide high-quality instruction for their assigned students (Cousik, 2022). The shortage of SPED teachers continues to challenge school leaders responsible for ensuring high-quality instruction for SPED students and meeting IEP compliance requirements in their schools.

The purpose of this study was to gain the perceptions of school leadership in recruiting and retaining special education teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic in the district. This section provides information related to the proposed methodology, the reasoning behind selecting the type of study approach, and an overview of the data

collection and analysis process. The reader will find information about the chosen research design and approach, including the participants and sampling procedures, ethical considerations, data collection, research questions, data analysis, and results.

Finding solutions to issues or social phenomena and figuring out how to adjust, alter, and enhance procedures or practices are the main goals of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research; while quantitative research involves using numbers or quantification, qualitative research is more about interpreting words, ideas, and thoughts (Thomas (2017). Data regarding the challenges in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers from district and campus leaders was collected and analyzed to arrive at the study findings and final themes.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that while most qualitative research shares commonalities, a basic qualitative design uniquely examines how individuals construct knowledge based on how they understand and give meaning to their environments. This approach focuses on creating new knowledge by thoroughly investigating an event and finding patterns and instances to help comprehend the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of district and school leaders regarding post-COVID recruiting and retention difficulties, the selection of a basic qualitative approach is appropriate. Using a basic qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gather insights based on their experiences leading schools or supporting the process at the district level in the years following the COVID-19 outbreak. Gaining insight into leaders' experiences provides essential knowledge that

could help improve the hiring and retention of special education teachers and improve working conditions to ensure their retention, directly addressing the study's problem.

The researcher evaluated multiple qualitative study designs for this study. The four options considered were a narrative inquiry, a phenomenology, an ethnography, and basic qualitative research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a narrative inquiry is a method that entails reflecting on past experiences and presenting stories about personal relationships in one's life. The researcher rejected this format because, in this study, the goal was not to investigate a particular phenomenon. A phenomenology was dismissed since it relies on understanding collective experiences rather than individual ones, as seen in a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An ethnography design analyzes cultural trends and involves observations and fieldwork (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher rejected this format since this study's purpose was to gain the perspectives of district and school leaders rather than focus on cultural norms, which would be the purpose of an ethnographic design. Out of the four approaches, a basic qualitative design was the best to gain school leaders' perceptions regarding recruiting and retention after the pandemic, which is the purpose of this study.

Participants

This study focused on the perspectives of two distinct groups of leaders: campus leaders and district-level leaders. The district-level leaders selected include personnel from the Departments of Special Education and Human Resources since they support school leaders in recruiting and retaining special education teachers. Each stakeholder group has a direct or supportive role in recruiting and retaining special education

teachers. Campus leaders (principals) are responsible for filling assigned teacher allocations at their respective campuses and supporting teachers' professional growth and retention. District leaders from the Department of Special Education ensure adequate special education allocations as determined by predetermined year-to-year staffing ratios and district and campus-wide student caseloads. They also design professional development for special education personnel year-round. Leaders from the Human Resources Department support campuses by recruiting special education teachers and other positions. These leaders also support schools in recruiting for other areas that are difficult to staff outside of special education, such as bilingual and secondary math/science, among a few others.

The study participants were a combination of elementary and secondary principals and district leaders from the Departments of Special Education and Human Resources. The researcher interviewed a purposely selected sample of these leaders. In current qualitative research studies, the samples range from nine to 18 study participants (McCabe, 2023; Shyne, 2021; Smith, 2024). The proposed sample of 25 participants exceeded that range but allowed room to fall within sample ranges from current research (McCabe, 2023; Shyne, 2021; Smith, 2024). According to Creswell and Cresswell (2018), saturation is frequently achieved in qualitative research studies with a sample size of roughly 25 people with the same experience under investigation. As long as the sample selected for research accurately represents the larger group studied, the study findings should apply to such a population (Thomas, 2017). The researcher ensured that the sample size and saturation requirements were met by inviting a larger recruitment of a

larger pool of qualifying participants via email a month prior to the interviews. The findings or perceptions collected provided both campus and district-level leadership perspectives. Participants received a gift card to incentivize their participation in the interviews.

Selected participants were contacted via email the last week of September 2024, for a preliminary debrief of the study's intent. I informed each participant of the intent and rationale of the study and the potential benefits and implications. Before the start of the study, the participants received an update and an overview of the final study design and approach for the completion of the study. After receiving the partner district's and Walden's IRB approval, each selected participant received an invitation to schedule their respective interview date and time via Sign-Up Genius. Each participant received information related to the purpose of the study and the period for completion of interviews.

Participants were contacted via email the last week of September 2024 to inform them of their selection. The researcher informed each participant of the intent and rationale of the study and the potential benefits and implications. After receiving the partner district's and Walden's IRB approval, each selected participant received an invitation to schedule their respective interview date and time via Sign-Up Genius. Each participant received information related to the study and the period for completion of interviews. Before the start of each interview, the researcher restated study-related information shared with participants in the study recruitment and consent email.

Ethical considerations in a study require that a researcher safeguards participants' information and rights and protects them from any potential harm from participating in a study (Smith, 2024). Consequently, keeping each participant's identity private is essential in all interactions with people, both in and out of work and when storing and reporting data (Thomas, 2017). Protecting participant names, localities, and their organizations is critical, as Thomas (2017) suggested. As Thomas (2017) also suggested, the researcher used pseudonyms as a protective measure for the confidentiality of all study participants. Pseudonyms as P1, P2, P3, respectively, were used for each of the 13 participants. The researcher masked all possible identifiable information of the study partner district as requested by the institution's IRB committee.

The researcher provided informed consent forms to every participant via email, as Thomas (2017) suggested. These provided details about their rights, research use, time commitment, and withdrawal from study participation. Participants received informed consent forms via email. These details included their rights, research use, time commitment, and withdrawal from study participation. As Thomas (2017) suggested, interviews took place virtually in a secure and secluded environment to ensure complete protection and confidentiality of participant responses. The researcher used password protection to ensure the safety of the data stored.

Data Collection

This study aimed to gain school leaders' perspectives regarding recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic in the partner district. Having an accurate sampling of the broader population studied is critical. There are multiple

approaches a researcher may choose when choosing a participant's sample (Thomas, 2017). Thomas (2017) states that a researcher can complete this task by taking a randomized sample. However, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that using a nonrandom, purposeful, and small sample is the best method for studying a particular demographic or phenomenon. The researcher followed the latter recommendation by selecting leaders who directly work in the recruitment and retention of teachers or those leaders at the district level who support the process.

The researcher used formal semistructured interviews to gain district and school leaders' perceptions regarding recruiting and retaining teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), interviews are the best tool for gathering participant insights about a particular occurrence. The semistructured interviews maintain consistency across interviews while leaving room for unexpected deviation from the interview protocol that pertains to the study (Bhattacharya, 2017). According to Johnson (2020, as cited in Smith, 2024), semistructured interviews allow a researcher to collect information on a topic using an open-ended question format. Semistructured interviews were the best approach for the study since The researcher aimed to gain insights from educational leaders who hold multiple roles at different levels in the organization, and each could bring distinct insights based on their work around the study problem. According to Bhattacharya (2017), semistructured interviews, as opposed to structured interviews, allow for unexpected deviations resulting from each participant's unique perspectives while maintaining consistency in the process. A survey would not

have allowed the researcher to ask for clarification on responses if needed. Semistructured interviews allow for comparing responses during the data analysis.

The period for conducting interviews was 3 to 4 weeks. Each interview lasted around 15 to 45 minutes. The researcher followed an interview protocol designed and administered to gain insight into the perceptions of each leader. The interview protocol consisted of eight questions, followed by an invitation for interviewees to add any information not captured during the interview. The questions allowed the researcher to collect information related to current vacancies, perceived challenges for recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the pandemic, differences between the pre-and post-pandemic periods related to recruiting and retention, unconventional strategies they have implemented to deal with special education teacher shortages, support and changes needed, and recommendations for other leaders. The findings provided necessary information to improve processes and ensure better recruiting and retention of special education teachers.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), before starting the interview process, each interview should begin with a planned interview methodology. As a result, the researcher restated the goal of the study, the time commitment, and the anonymity or confidentiality. To guarantee no distractions for any interviewee, the researcher booked and used private and quiet rooms for all interviews. Data from interviews were audio recorded to ensure their integrity.

Each interviewee in this study was asked predeveloped questions that align with the study's research question, which was the following:

RQ-1: Why do leaders in the school district continue to face difficulties with recruiting and retaining special education teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic period?

The interview questions were the following:

1. What special education units do you have in your campus or support as district leader?
2. What would you say have been obstacles in the recruitment of special education teachers after the pandemic in the district, if any?
3. What would you say have been obstacles in the retention of special education teachers after the pandemic in the district, if any?
4. What areas of special education do you consider have been the most challenging to recruit or retain teachers for in the district? Why do you think these areas have been the most challenging?
5. Regarding the recruitment and retention of special education teachers, have you noticed a difference between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic years? What would you say are the biggest differences?
6. What unconventional methods or alternative strategies have you implemented or supported (district level), if any, to ensure you have adequate coverage for your available special education positions?
7. What support or changes do you believe could help facilitate the recruitment and retention of special education teachers in the district?

8. Are there any recommendations you have for other campus or district level leaders regarding how they can better manage the difficulties related to recruiting and retaining special education teachers?

The Role of the Researcher

Before each interview, the researcher ensured that the setting for each interview met all the requirements for protecting participants from any harm, which included posting a "do not disturb" sign in the interview rooms, setting up the area with all the tools needed, and ensuring the area was inaccessible by anyone in the facility at that time. As interviews began, the researcher acted as process observer and participant. The researcher posed questions, observed participant reactions and emotions, and listened carefully for responses in his role as observer. As a participant, the researcher engaged with interviewees by clarifying questions, asking for clarification, or elaborating on responses, and ensuring an unbiased approach to the process. The researcher recorded each interview using a voice recording application and saved each audio file for transcription after the interviews.

Currently, the researcher serves in a district's leadership role. Before this assignment, he was the principal of two elementary schools in separate school districts. In each of these roles, the researcher witnessed the adverse impact of unfilled special education vacancies directly or in a supporting role. To avoid any bias and conflict of interest related to his role, he excluded the principals under his supervision in his current role. Since most participants were campus leaders, he explained to each of them his

function as a researcher rather than a district leader as a measure of ethics to mitigate a power imbalance dynamic or view from participants.

Data Analysis

An in-depth analysis of the interview data took place through an inductive analysis approach. According to Bhattacharya (2017), inductive analysis allows a researcher to group data from qualitative research into smaller groups or clusters with similar characteristics or patterns that eventually become study themes. By engaging in inductive analysis of data collected from each participant after the conclusion of all interviews, the researcher arrived at four major themes that informed the purpose of this study. The data collected and major themes are presented later in this section.

By analyzing language and insight from qualitative data, a researcher constructs meaning and applies interpretivist presumptions (Thomas, 2017). For the aim of this study, Thomas (2017) suggested using the constant comparative approach to assess and construct meaning from the perspectives of study participants. This approach was applicable to this study since the researcher aimed to gain the perceptions of school leaders in the district regarding hiring and retaining special education teachers following the COVID-19 outbreak. The constant comparative approach, according to Thomas (2017), involves going over the data again and comparing every phrase, sentence, and paragraph element with every other piece. Based on this continuing comparison, the researcher annotated the data with names and colors that described salient codes or groupings. To establish themes for the study, the researcher collected data and engaged in in inductive analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). He identified themes that classify and

summarize the content of the collected data by employing a constant comparative method (Thomas, 2017). The researcher classified codes that indicate frequent trends to generate an overview of the interview data during the first coding cycle. He prioritized the most important concepts in the second coding cycle and developed his ideas further in the third coding cycle; final study themes emerged from the merging of recurring ideas and concepts in the coding process.

The researcher used a voice recording application and saved all audio files to capture accurate interview data. A transcription from each audio file was saved to a document he later used to engage in the coding process. He carefully listened to each audio file and manually pulled data pieces to be used in the Data Analysis Results section.

The coding process began following the first reading of the data and labeling emerging themes and phrases at first glance. The researcher organized and coded the data manually. Codes developed from the initial and subsequent reading rounds of the data and the patterns observed. The researcher created a table with each emerging theme, sub-category or code, and frequency of participant mentions to portray the data analysis visually. Bhattacharya (2017) describes the thematic narratives as elucidating the identified themes and that such clarification makes the results and conclusions more understandable. After identifying themes, the researcher used thematic narratives to explain the identified themes. Thematic narratives explain themes after identifying headings for the main themes (Bhattacharya, 2017). The researcher reported qualitative

findings based on themes identified in interviewee responses and the comparison of interviewees' responses throughout the study.

Evidence of Quality Assurance

The need to learn and arrive at new knowledge is part of human nature (Hasan et al., 2021). Qualitative research requires that the researcher engages in quality interactions with others to collect the most accurate information about a particular subject or phenomenon (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). A researcher must adhere to ethical research practices to collect accurate data. (Hasan et al., 2021). As recommended by (Hasan et al., 2021), the researcher applied these principles to ensure accurate data collection and protect the dignity and rights of each of the 13 participants from the beginning to the end of the study.

The first measure of ethics in this study was in the selection of the topic of study. Hasan et al. (2021) state that a study topic must address a realistic and present-day problem. The topic selection from this study met each requirement in that it is a recent and realistic local problem for the study partner district and many other school districts nationwide. The study research question, interview questions, and their alignment with the study purpose allow the researcher to collect relevant and aligned data, another ethical requirement in a study, as stated by Hasan et al. (2021).

The researcher employed measures to ensure the study's trustworthiness. In terms of credibility, the researcher engaged in reflexivity throughout the data collection process to avoid engaging in researcher bias, as Ravitch and Carl (2021, as cited in McCabe, 2023) recommend. According to Ahmed (2024), reflexivity involves a researcher's

awareness to recognize his biases during the research period to ensure that findings are aligned with the data collected. From the beginning to the end of the study, the researcher was reflective and remained aware of possible bias related to the topic and used a reflexivity document to record reflexivity actions such as acknowledging and documenting personal biases, reflecting on data analysis, and recording any additional issues from the process.

Triangulation was another trustworthiness measure implemented in this study by the researcher. He used data from the partner district, available literature, interviews, and observations from study participants. Ahmed (2024) recommends using triangulation in research to ensure findings do not rely only on single metrics or data sources.

Regarding transferability, the researcher detailed his strategy for arriving at the study's participant sampling and how such selection represents the larger population of leaders responsible for recruiting and retaining teachers in the partner district. Ahmed (2024) suggests that a researcher describes his sampling methods to ensure the findings are transferable and applicable to a larger population inside or outside the study site or context.

Lastly, the researcher used confirmability measures to ensure the confirmability and accuracy of the interpretation of the study findings. The first measure implemented was a peer debrief. As Ahmed (2024) recommended, the researcher interacted with a colleague conducting a doctoral study to corroborate the findings and mitigate personal bias's influence. The results were shared with the study chair for member checking, as Ahmed (2024) also recommends and Walden University requires.

Data Analysis Results

The researcher intended to carry out this qualitative study in response to leadership discussions regarding the significant number of special education vacancies in the district, the difficulties experienced by school leaders following the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of these vacancies, and managing IDEA requirements, such as the implementation of IEPs and meeting special education-related compliance. Gaining leaders' perceptions regarding retention and recruiting in this area could be vital in informing future processes at the district and campus level, and local teacher preparation programs could lower the number of open positions in all areas of special education.

The data revealed four themes:

1. Training and supporting special education teachers and staff are vital for their retention.
2. Work-related stressors increase the likelihood of special education teacher attrition.
3. Extreme student behavior and diverse needs make special education environments overwhelming for special education teachers and staff.
4. Post-pandemic scarcity of SPED-certified applicants is hindering the recruitment of special education teachers.

Although the concepts are separate, they are interrelated and codependent, making it difficult to distinguish between them. Table 1 provides information about each theme and related subthemes identified during the data analysis process and the respective number of participant mentions.

Table 1

Research Themes and Frequency of Participants' Responses

Themes/Subthemes	No. of references
Training and supporting special education teachers and staff are vital for their retention.	
a. Need for training	38
b. Need for support (external/district)	19
c. Need for support (internal/campus)	13
d. Strategic scheduling	6
Total	76
Work-related stressors increase the likelihood of special education teacher attrition.	
a. Paperwork/compliance	10
b. Increase caseloads	25
c. Mental/burnout/stress	10
Total	45
Extreme student behavior and diverse needs make special education environments overwhelming for special education teachers and staff.	
a. Behavior/behavioral units	34
b. Increased student needs (academic and others)	10
Total	44
Post-pandemic scarcity of SPED-certified applicants is hindering the recruitment of special education teachers.	
a. Lack of applicants	5
b. Certification demands	13
c. Pay/compensation	21
d. Other job options for applicants	5
Total	44

Theme 1: Training and Supporting Special Education Teachers and Staff Is Vital for Their Retention

The first emerging theme in this study was overwhelmingly the most mentioned by the participants. Support from school leaders and the working environment they provide could be critical factors in their ability to retain their teachers (Gillani et al., 2022). Participants spoke extensively about how they feel the lack of training and support for special education teachers and units is a major precursor of difficulties that eventually impact the ability of school leaders to retain their SPED teachers. They expressed how they feel the level of unpreparedness of adults in SPED units, such as teachers and SPED paraprofessionals, causes daily struggles that ultimately affect their ability to meet IEP requirements.

This first theme encompassed four subthemes related to SPED staff needs. Those are the following:

1. Training needs
2. District-level support
3. Campus-level support
4. Strategic scheduling

The need for training received nearly half the mentions in this first theme which highlights the importance of quality PD opportunities for SPED staff. The second most mentioned subtheme was the need for district-level support, including campus visits and engagement in observation, feedback, and support cycles between SPED teachers and district-level support personnel. The next subtheme with more mentions was the need for

campus-level support, which encompasses support from the administration and an overall supportive and collaborative environment for special education teachers and personnel within the campus. Strategic scheduling of school personnel was the least mentioned subtheme in the first salient theme of the study. Strategic scheduling involves efficiently maximizing available staff so all required IEP minutes are covered and students and staff feel supported during services.

Need for Training

P1 expressed the following in regard to the lack of preparation of most of her special education teachers:

> The majority of our SPED team was brand new. Even to find a team leader, I couldn't find a team leader because everybody was in their first or second year still learning the role. So, knowing exactly what to do, and I guess it's so different because you have a student that may have autism, a student that needs a BIP, a student that needs just in-class support. So, knowing all those what-ifs, it's almost like they're having to learn it as they get that student. They get a training, but it's like an overall training.

P2 added:

> And then you've got this little person in front of you who is aggressive and having tantrums, and you're trying to figure out the instinct is there to want to help and support, but there's no training. There's no training and preparation.

In regard to SPED aid retention, P2 expressed the following: "Aid retention is horrific as well. … There's even less training for them about what to do." P2 added:

> The same reasons that I just talked about, where they're ill-equipped and they come into the role thinking that they're going to receive the training and support that they need, and then when they don't, it becomes way too overwhelming.

P5 added,

> I think one of the reasons that they may not be retained is, again, that level of support. Even though we offer a lot, and we give them resources and support, it may not be enough because, again, they're coming straight… It's a clean slate coming into education and not having background knowledge of being a teacher to begin with.

P12 added about the need for training and support for retaining special education teachers:

> Then number two, I think we need to do a better job of providing support and training for our teachers so that they stay. I think from the district level, … providing a job and better training and support for them, and even over the summer, about how to deal with the different types of behaviors, how to track data, how to make those decisions to support students."

P13 expressed her feelings about the need for specialized training as follows:

> I definitely think that our teachers need more training, just more, um, on the job training as far as having the specialized instructors come out and work with them and walk them through a day. Because when they're sitting in a training away from kids, yes, in the ideal world, you would restrain a student by just hugging them. But in real life, when they are throwing things and flying all around, you

know, it's a different ball game. So really just I think we release our teachers into those spaces without adequate training and adequate follow-up to ensure that they feel confident in what they're doing for behavior, for academics, because I know recently, that's been one of my concerns that I've brought up in different meetings of my spend staff. They're getting trained on how to write a PLAAFP how to do this, how to do that, those procedural things, but they're not getting trained on content.

Dyslexia teachers are now under the umbrella of special education. P7 expressed the following about her dyslexia teacher:

She has no background in dyslexia, but she is certified in special education, but she doesn't understand the program. And so, we're at this point in the year in October, and she still has not received training on how to deliver the program. So as a campus, to ensure that our students are getting what they need, I have another teacher that does have the experience who's providing that training for the teacher, but the training is not coming from the district. And so, we're doing what we can for survival purposes and to make sure our students are getting the services that they need. So, I think definitely it's just the training that the teachers are receiving. So, if you're going to hire someone that doesn't and have the skill, then you need to have an immediate intervention for how you're going to train them before they step foot into a classroom, or who's going to come and model for them, or what is the plan of action to make sure that they have the skill to be there.

Regarding new teachers, P2 added:

> Lack of professional development. So, they're coming into the job role with zero experience, and it's on the job learning, but they're working with our neediest students and our students who have the highest, most significant needs. …, they're placed into a classroom with a group of students who have significantly high needs, and they don't have the training to know how to meet those needs. They're provided with documentation. Here's all these papers that we want you to read that tell you what their eligibility is and what their program is, but no direct support and training in what the words on that paper mean and what that actually translates to in the classroom. It's incredibly overwhelming.

In relation to instructional aides in special education classrooms, who are those who directly support the special education teachers, P1 expressed the following:

> And so, the other part is even just thinking about our aides. Our aides, they have no clue what they're getting themselves into. So, whenever they're interviewing with me, I ask them, do you know what the [Behavior Support Unit] aid entails? And so, they tell me a little bit, and I was like, okay, I'm going to be literally honest. This is what you'll see. This is like your challenges that you're going to see every day. How would you react? And some of them will say, Thank you. No, I'm okay. I don't want it. And then the others do come on board. But again, it's almost like the lack of training.

P7 added the following:

> I think what's more difficult, more so, is the retaining of the paras [paras are paraprofessionals or aides]. So, the paras are the ones that are ... In this situation, they've all been there for a long period of time, and so they stay there because they're a team. But for example, on my previous campus, it was more difficult to retain them. They weren't used to the students that they were working with, and so just not having the training that they needed to complete the jobs is a barrier that I faced with the retention piece.

P1 also mentioned how she has had to utilize other paraprofessionals to support the work of SPED teachers: "I had to use my bilingual aid or my EB compliance aid to just provide support for half a day or things like that." P1 added,

> Now, the good thing … is that my AP is SPED certified, and she supervises them. So, it's a blessing in a way for me because she's knowledgeable of that, and she fills in the gaps. But at the same time, she has her own roles and responsibilities, and she's trying to double help them out with the specific things and do her AP role.

Need for Support (External and Internal)

Regarding the need for external (district level) support, P1 expressed the following about program managers: "But I feel like they get new program managers that sometimes are not as knowledgeable..."

P1 added:

> I think they're spread too thin because they have several campuses. And when you think about the needs that we have, it really is something that if they would

> either have less teachers or less campuses, it seems like they would actually be able to go around much more often.

P3 expressed her feelings about the lack of ability to support at the district level:

> I can't get the level of support that I need for them for a couple of reasons. One, because there's not enough staff at the district level, or two, I'm in a situation right now where everybody at the district level is new to the program as well, and nobody seems to know how this program is supposed to run, or everyone has a different idea. So, my poor teacher is getting four different messages about how this program is supposed to be run. And so, from a teacher perspective, she's like, this is crazy.

P4 added the following: "And then the last thing is the lack of support. The Special Ed Department is wonderful, but with the cases and the vacancies and the uncertified teachers that are filling these vacancies, they're probably stretched thin." P5 expressed her views about the need for specialized support in self-contained units:

> I also think, again, it goes back to, especially our specialized units, having the support that's really fit for them. Because you can have an overarching support of special Ed and some of the paperwork and ARDs, but then it's what does … [self-contained program] look like versus an (another self-contained program) classroom versus more specialized support.

Regarding availability of district support staff, P7 added,

> Also just maybe providing really easy access to people that can support. So sometimes responsiveness isn't always there. So, it's just making sure that if

> we're reaching out to the district or to whoever, that someone's readily available to at least answer the call and say, hey, we'll be there within two days or we'll be there.

P8 expanded about the lack of ability to support from the district's special education department due the size of the team. "In a small district, they're equitable. Your Sped Department is probably equally, if not a little bit bigger than your curriculum department. In your large districts, it's a little bit reverse." P8 later added: "There's one of them, there's several of us, … how do we support 26 campuses when there's only nine of us?"

P10 expressed her concerns regarding support for prospective special education teachers in such a large school district:

> The other thing that I think has become a challenge in recruiting is just how large our district is. What I've noticed is when I'm talking to potential candidates, they're concerned about the support that they will receive. And the fact that our district is so large, do we have enough district support to come out and help? Especially the self-contained specialized programs.

P10 added: "Even this year, I had a teacher who wanted to resign, and he was one of my [self-contained program] teachers, and he just said he can't do it anymore. He doesn't have enough support." P10 mentioned an example of how direct support from the special education department can be beneficial in the retention of teachers:

> Luckily, we were able to bring in some district support for that situation, and one of our directors was very helpful. And even he himself reached out and talked to

> this teacher personally to see what the district could do to keep him. And so, when we're talking about retaining teachers, I think when they get that personal connection from people even off the campus that want them to stay, it helps to retain them.

P7 mentioned the need for her to be available for her behavior program teacher:

> And then for my [behavior support unit] classroom, I think one of my challenges with her is just making sure that she feels supported. And so, because it is a very challenging classroom with a lot of student behaviors, she just needs a lot of support. So, I think to retain her, I just have to always be very available to her and making sure that she's supported, and she feels like she has everything that she needs.

P9 spoke about the impact of their inability to support teachers at the secondary level:

> Now for secondary, when we have people out, it's still the same. It's the team. Okay, how volatile is the classroom? Is the coverage? Who can we get to support? And then, unfortunately for some, we don't have anyone to support. So, if it's in class support position, sometimes those don't get covered because we're trying to cover actual classrooms that have 10 to 30 kids coming in. We may not be able to support the co-teach as much or the in-class support because we just don't have the manpower.

She gave an example of how her support may look like:

> Hey, how's it going? I know it's tough. Let me be down there in the trenches, too, with you. I'm going to come down and lend some time and pop in and help and support and give you a break or whatever it is. So, it's really just showing the support and then getting multiple hands involved. So then when you're trying to cover, it's not just three people trying to cover. Now you have 10. And so even though it's overwhelming, we can all be overwhelmed together, and then there's a little comfort.

Strategic Scheduling

To provide the adequate support for special education teachers and students, especially those in self-contained units, campus leaders have had to become creative with how they schedule student service time allocation and the utilization of available personnel. P2 expressed the following regarding the need for strategic scheduling of staff: "We had to redo the entire Sped schedule and open up blocks of time in a regular Sped teacher's class, a regular Sped teacher's schedule to help cover in [self-contained unit]. We've had to do some out-of-the-box scheduling." P2 added: "So we've had to do some innovative scheduling where we are combining a couple of grade levels and resource to open up-time for this teacher to go in and help do [self-contained unit]." P7 expressed,

> But for instance, recently I lost one of my paraprofessionals. And so, to cover that position, we're having to substitute the way that we arrange our schedule of services so that all of the students are receiving their services. So, we're having to group kids differently, move kids around into different classrooms just to make sure that we have the coverage because we are short staffed in that position.

P10 also explained her need for strategic scheduling:

> We've really had to drill down in our master schedule to the students in their specific number of minutes that they get. And we've had to strategically schedule. If you have five kids that get 30 minutes three times a week, but then you have five other kids that get 50 minutes five times a week, You have to schedule your paras so that since the classes are 50 minutes long, they could go to one class for half the period and another class for the other half of the period, and then another para that stays with the ones that get it every day, that get services every day. In the past, we would just throw a para in there and have them just stay the whole time regardless of how many minutes the student gets. But we've really had to drill down and strategically schedule the kids.

Theme 2: Work-Related Stressors Increase the Likelihood of Special Education Teacher Attrition

Work-related stressors emerged as the second major theme of this project. Although participants expressed work-related stressors related to behavior and work in behavioral and self-contained units, those fell into a separate theme due to the many related mentions. This theme was divided into three main categories based on the frequency of mentions during interviews: paperwork and compliance, increased caseloads, and mental health/burnout/stress. Paperwork and compliance include the administrative pressure and legal duties that teachers encounter; interviewees emphasized the time-consuming nature of paperwork and the anxiety that comes with making sure various requirements are followed. Increased caseloads was the most frequently

mentioned category within this theme, with nearly double the mentions compared to the other two categories. The increasing volume of cases they must manage, which frequently results in longer workdays and less time for each case, caused interviewees to express a great deal of stress. Mental health/burnout/stress involves respondents talking about the emotional toll of their jobs, such as feelings of fatigue, anxiety, and the effect on their general well-being; it also contains references to mental health issues, burnout, and overall stress. While paperwork and compliance and mental health/burnout/stress were equally mentioned, the number of mentions in the increase caseloads category highlights how the increase is students directly impacts SPED teachers stress levels and well-being at work.

Paperwork/Compliance

One of the most mentioned stressors was the increased amount of paperwork and compliance-related issues special education teachers have managed after the pandemic due to increased caseloads. P1 stated,

> A lot of it has been the paperwork. It is just a lot. It becomes a little bit overwhelming. So, if you already have a person that's not good with time management and they're brand new to this, the paperwork has a lot to do with it. So, we struggled with that after the pandemic because the majority of our SPED team was brand new.

P4 added, "I also think that some of that paperwork has to be taken off of them." Similarly, P5 added, "The paperwork, on top of also teaching and things like that, can be a lot." P9 commented on how paperwork requirements affect retention: "I would say the

retention part is for some, the amount of paperwork that's needed, the amount of paperwork for them to complete, the volume of students and all their specific needs." P13 added: "So not only are they dealing with the behaviors and all of the extra that is in the classroom, they're having to do all the paperwork that goes along with each of those students." P10 gave her teachers time to work on paperwork during one of the teacher professional development days. P10 stated, "And then in the afternoon, they just worked on hard paperwork, and they were very, very appreciative of that." Regarding compliance, including paperwork, P5 stated the following: "And they're having more ARDs, they're having more paperwork, they're having more things to have to keep up with." P9 added, "And it's, okay, how do you make sure you manage all the paperwork and the ARD's and meeting the needs of them? And how often do you see the student? And so, it becomes that volume."

Increase Caseloads

Increased caseloads refer to the increase in the number of students or cases that each teacher is assigned to manage and serve. Out of all work-related stressors, increased caseloads was by far the most mentioned by the participants. P1 mentioned how prospective teachers/applicants for special education positions ask about the type of caseload they would be managing. P1 stated,

> Yes, because the first question that always is being asked, how many kids do I have on my caseload? So, I think that has a lot to do with it. Now, when I interview for [behavior support unit], they know what it is. But versus when I

> interview for a resource teacher, they're asking, how many students will they get in one setting? How many students are in their caseload?

P2 expressed her concerns for the increased numbers in self-contained units. P2 stated, "I think the programs are becoming too full, too fast. I think some supports that we could provide, it's like my [self-contained program] teacher or my [self-contained program] teacher or whomever will hear like, There's no more room." P3 stated,

> Education does not have the best reputation education right now out in the public, and especially, I think, some of our specialized programs. I think that part is because our numbers have increased drastically since COVID. So, the numbers of students who are qualifying for special education have increased drastically, and the staffing has not increased. So, it's pretty common knowledge, I feel like, out in the public that there's an increase in students and there's not enough staff.

P3 later added,

> To me, and I don't know if it's true or not, but to me, it feels like the numbers are so much higher. So, there's just so many more students and fewer staff. So that discrepancy seems to have gotten.

P4 spoke about not only caseloads have increased but also the severity of such cases: "The decrease has happened, and I think it has a lot to do with the increase of special students, the populations have increased, the cases have increased, and also the severity have increased." P5 addressed the increased identification of students for special education after the pandemic: "I think post-COVID, I will also say another barrier is the amount of kids, the caseload, where more and more kids are getting identified." P10

added the following related to hardships in retaining teachers due to increased student numbers: “And so when they hear what their class size might be or how many kids will be on their caseload, they get a little bit ... It’s hard to retain them. It’s been really difficult.” P13 added,

> I think one of the biggest differences is that the number of SPED kids has increased so much, and the number of teachers has not increased. So, it’s just supply and demand is not matching. Our demand ... I mean, my school, just in the last year has increased from about 17% SPED to 22% SPED. I think the state or the national average is around 12%. We’re significantly higher than what we should need. So, the supply is not there.

P7 also spoke about the increase of student numbers in self-contained units.

> Sometimes you see that a program is working really well, so students are brought into that program because of that. And so, then the numbers in that program begin to increase, which then leads to a teacher burnout of a really good qualified staff member. So, I’m thinking just making sure that you’re maintaining that balance of the classrooms.

P9 added, “I’d say our specialized programs are the hardest ones to recruit and retain because you have to have a lot of the students in those programs.” P12 added,

> Well, the main difference is that the number of students has increased. After the pandemic, the number of students in our special education classes has increased. A two or three-fold. When I look back at even pictures of when I started in years before, you would have maybe three or four students in [self-contained unit],

> maybe five or six students in [self-contained unit]. Right now, I have 11 students in [self-contained unit], and I have 13 students in [self-contained unit] and counting. So, the large number of students has increased exponentially. More students are being diagnosed with emotional disturbance or other types of conditions that warrant placement in these programs. So, I would say that is a big reason.

P10 gave her perspectives about this concern at the secondary level:

> I would say my teachers had 16 to 18 kids. And then when we came back and we lost those extra staff members that we got during the pandemic, they went up to 22 to 23 kids. And then here at the high school level, they're around 25 or 26 kids. I don't know what they were before, but I can imagine that it probably went up. And I think partially that's because more students have qualified for special education since the pandemic. Our district, specifically, we did a lot of child find efforts, and now we're really behind and getting caught up on getting those kids services. And so that has been a factor in the caseload as well.

Mental/Burnout/Stress

The last category that emerged as a trend in participants' mentions under work-related stressors were instances associated with mental struggles, burnout, and stress. P2 expressed her views regarding mental health concerns in special education teachers after the pandemic:

> I don't know the best way to say it, but maybe, like a, some mental health concerns… with special education teachers. They just haven't adapted as well as I

> would anticipate them to adapt. They struggle a lot more, um, a lot more, um sensitive, um, a lot the workload, being able to meet deadlines and stuff, it's a little bit more difficult for them. Even though they have maybe 13, 14 kids they case manage, um, they tend to be way more overwhelmed filmed than the regular teachers.

P4 added the following:

> Mental capacity, I believe, not only for the students, but the teachers. I think a lot of people who came back after the pandemic, including ourselves, our mental capacity has totally changed. I think that that is something. There's an increase in leaves, there's an increase in mental concerns, and also just the behaviors of students.

P7 commented on how successful teachers at times end up getting more students which may lead to burnout:

> So then that leads to, let's put them in the classrooms where the teachers are being successful, which is understandable. But I do think that being aware that these teachers that are being successful also need adequate supports and to be taken for people to take them in mind. Like, yes, they're doing well, but that doesn't mean go and add more because then that could cause burnout.

P11 added,

> So, it's been extremely difficult. They're not happy. So many have shared that already this year, and we haven't even gotten through the first semester, and they're like, this is not real. This is not live. This is not normal.

Theme 3: Extreme Student Behavior and Diverse Needs Make Special Education Environments Overwhelming for Special Education Teachers and Staff

Extreme Student Behavior Challenges and Other Student Needs emerged as the third theme in the study. High levels of burnout may be linked to insufficient practice or preparation to effectively address behavioral challenges with students, as special education teachers who work with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders generally have less experience than special education teachers in general (Billingsley et al., 2006; Garwood et al., 2018, as cited in Brunsting et al., 2021). Participants expressed their perspectives regarding challenges related to students' extreme behaviors in recent years, the unique challenges of behavioral and other self-contained special education units, and other students' needs outside the behavioral category. This theme is divided into two categories: behaviors/behavioral units and other student needs. The first category will include participant mentions directly related to extreme behaviors students have exhibited since returning to face-to-face instruction after the pandemic and the challenges related to recruiting and retaining staff in self-contained special education units, especially those serving students with behavioral needs. The second category, other student needs, includes participants' views regarding other student needs unrelated to extreme behaviors such as academic skill deficits, regression, and social-emotional needs.

Behavior/Behavioral Units

Most participants in the study expressed that one of the most significant changes and challenges they have witnessed in special education post pandemic is the increase in the severity and amount of student behaviors, especially in behavioral support units.

Participants made a clear connection between how these challenges directly affect recruiting prospective special education teachers and retaining special education teachers currently on the job. P1 mentioned how teachers are now seeing behaviors they did not see prior to the pandemic period. P1 stated,

> But I would say out of everything, however, we've seen extreme behaviors where we really never saw that before. And it didn't matter if it was the primary students or the intermediate students, it was just all across the board. We weren't sure if it was the lack of structures in place that they didn't have at home versus what we had here, the routines that we had in a school setting and versus at home.

P2 expressed how teachers get tired of dealing with the severity of these behaviors in behavioral units. "It's more difficult when you're talking about specialized units, especially [two behavioral self-contained units]. The severity… they get tired of dealing with the same meltdowns and the same behaviors, and so they get worn out." P5 added, "But I would say behaviors seem to sometimes be a challenge for our special Ed teachers or the types of behaviors, I would say." P6 added, "But I do see that that sometimes can be the ones that are more of a challenge, those who have more the physical and behavior needs." P7 added, "And so it's really hard for them to know what to do in those situations, mainly with behaviors." P8 made a direct connection between student behaviors and its impact on teacher hiring: "It's just behaviors in kids have escalated since the pandemic, which I think makes it more challenging for us to hire teachers to come into the schools and work with kids' behaviors." P13 expressed, "Well, the students in the behavior [unit] seem to be more aggressive and more violent than they were prior

to COVID. So, a person can only get beat up so much before they're exhausted with it." P13 added, "Behavior is a huge barrier for recruiting and retaining staff. The behaviors of students, the behaviors of parents, it's just exhausting."

Several participants addressed the challenge with behavioral units more directly. P9 expressed the following:

> Just again, teachers who want to teach students that need to be in those programs is where finding the right people who want to teach it and being willing to, especially [behavioral support unit]. It might be more the extreme. So, like [behavioral support unit], then our [behavioral support unit] because you have to be prepared for outbursts or spitting or hitting or throwing, all the behaviors from both.

P9 added: "We had a [behavioral support unit] teacher that went out on extended leave. We had some high volatile behaviors." P10 added,

> Definitely the self-contained programs. I think that teachers are concerned about being in the same room all day with the same group of kids, especially at the secondary level, when all the other kids, the teachers only have them for 50 minutes at a time. And the classrooms like [two behavior support units] or even sometimes [life-skills support unit] is physically hard on the teachers at times. And I think that they get a little bit nervous about whether or not, because high school kids are big, whether or not as a [age], [weight and gender], I'm going to be able to stay safe. I think if I can't assure them of the support when I'm interviewing them or trying to recruit them at a job fair, they go to the next table

> and look to see if there's a resource and inclusion spot available, rather than a self-contained.

P12 added: "We usually start with new teachers almost every year because it's just like a revolving door, especially in your more severe programs like [behavioral support units]."

P12 added,

> And then just the extreme behaviors, physical aggression that students are demonstrating. It's hard to keep staff. They don't last too long. I've had teachers resign mid-year and paraprofessionals resign mid-year due to the fact that the behaviors are extreme, the numbers are increasing, and they don't feel that they're equipped to handle the class.

P13 added,

> The extreme behaviors, um, are more extreme than they were before.. Um, it seems like every year it's more and more extreme. Currently, my behavior unit, it's supposed to have a teacher and two paras. I only have one para in there, so they're short staffed. And so that teacher and para, they're getting exhausted because I can't fulfill the need.

Increased Student Needs (Academic and Others)

Participants have voiced worries about the difficulties brought on by the wide range of student demands they have seen recently. Among these difficulties are meeting a variety of emotional and academic requirements, which have grown more obvious and intricate after the COVID-19 pandemic. P1 spoke about how the academic gaps seen in students after are contributing to increases in students qualifying for special education:

> We've noticed that there were student gaps, and it's not just regular students, but it's been across the board. But I feel like a lot of our special Ed students have had even greater gaps, so that's part of it.

P1 added: "And I think a lot of those academic gaps that we're starting to see, I think that's why a lot of there's more kids qualifying for SPED. So, I think that's also where it gets a little overwhelming." P3 expressed her concerns about the increased severity of student needs. "And it feels like the needs of the students have become more severe." P3 added: "And now those kids' gaps are getting bigger in Gen Ed because they're not getting the in-class support that they to try and close their gaps." P4 expressed how this increased severity is affecting special education teacher retention. "Also, the severity of the students, and also kids who are misdiagnosed. These are the number one thing that we hear on the reason why people are leaving."

Regarding academic regression as well as increased behaviors, P6 expressed the following: "And I would say our students, it was more challenging because we saw regression with growth as well as with, again, I have to say, with behavior in general." P11 added,

> So, with COVID, there was a lot of loss of structured supports and set schedules and consistency of instructional time and building that stamina and having those instructional exposure to accountability, to assessments, to online. And after COVID, since they didn't have it and it wasn't the same because we're at a Title 1 campus, it's like low income. They don't have Internet, they don't have laptops, they don't have computers at home. They came in … two grade levels below

> because they don't have the parent background, they don't have the resources at home. So, the structures they got at school, they didn't even get at home. So that whole time was regression.

Regarding her 3-year Early Childhood Program and her ability to keep the classroom staffed, P11 added,

> It's our first year having 3-year-olds, which it's a half day, 4 in the AM and 4 in the PM. It's a new teacher, and that's been a revolving door. Every single year is a new teacher because of the academic needs, the social needs, the emotional needs, the mental capacity, and their set abilities.

Theme 4: Post-Pandemic Scarcity of SPED-Certified Applicants Is Hindering the Recruitment of Special Education Teachers

The last major theme emerged from the data was the lack of certified and highly qualified applicants for special education positions. Participants expressed frustration due to not having an available pool or even single qualified candidates to interview and hire for their special education vacancies. Their mentions related to this theme fell into four main categories: lack of applicants, certification demands, pay/compensation, and other job options for applicants.

Lack of Applicants

Data indicated that the lack of special education applicants was a common concern for participants. P2 highlighted the difference in applicant supply from prior to the pandemic period to now:

> I think in 2018, there were a lot more. We had more variety. If one left, there were more in the pool to pull from. I think now when one leaves, it's scary. You don't know where you're going to get the next one from. So, I think quantity and I think quality.

P5 mentioned that less candidates are coming into teaching nowadays, especially for special education:

> We see a lot less student teachers, and that pipeline of individuals coming out of universities going into teaching, we're seeing less and less. So that includes special Ed as well. So overall, when we go to a University's Job fairs, most kids that graduate is so small, and they know where they're going to go.

P6 expressed how hard it has been for her to find prospective teachers for her positions, especially in behavioral units. "I think, like I said, the challenge was just the numbers of people were not out there."

P6 added,

> It was just hard to get individuals, the quality, and the experience. I will tell you, not that you lower your expectations, but I had to change interview questions somewhat because I, you didn't have the pool number of applicants, things like that.

To the question of what obstacles in the recruitment of special education teachers after the pandemic have been, P9 stated the following:

> I would say there was more quantity of applicants before the pandemic. When you have more quantity, you have more quality and skills, and training, and education

> before the pandemic. Um, it seems that since the pandemic, there's less volume of applicants. And so, when you have less volume, sometimes you have less quality of skills because you don't have 10 people to interview. There was a time when we could set up an interview, and then we'd set up a whole mock lesson, and you could come back in a couple of days. Well, now we're recruiting and interviewing and almost checking references that day and hiring on the spot because that same applicant that I'm interviewing is interviewing at two or three other schools. Whereas before the pandemic, you could set up an interview and have you meet with the team and come back another day and teach some of the kids, and you have more time because they're not... we're not all buying for the same candidate.

Certification Demands

The requirement for prospective applicant teachers to hold valid SPED certification was identified in the data as another challenge leaders have to navigate as they work to fill their vacant positions. P2 identified lack of certification from applicants as a one obstacle to the recruitment of SPED teachers. P2 stated: "Some of the obstacles that I have seen are, one, there's not enough certified special Ed teachers. There's just a lack of certified teachers, especially special education teachers in general." P3 added: "Well, first of all, there just doesn't seem to be candidates coming out of school with teaching certificates. We're looking at mostly all certified teachers. So that in itself is difficult because it feels like the pool has shrunk." P7 added,

> Some of the obstacles that I faced is definitely finding people that are certified in special education. I've had to resort to those emergency alternative certifications

> to be able to hire staff for those positions, and also just the number of people available or even wanting to interview for that type of position.

Regarding testing requirements for SPED certification, P4 highlighted the added tests aspiring teachers must take:

> One other thing that we see is a huge challenge is individuals that are in special education, they're not getting also the content. We believe that the increase in areas that need that EC6 or the content, not just the SPED, has decreased. The schools and stuff are not promoting that for some reason.

P5 added the following regarding university requirements and required testing for certification completion:

> A lot of universities do not want them to take content areas and the special Ed. They want them to go one route because it's less test for them to have to take coming out of the university. So, when you think about that, the university gets a ding when they don't pass the test. Well, the more tests you have to take, they don't want you to have to do that. They want you to go one route and that's it. And so, I see that even post-COVID, they're not really preparing even those few that are there getting their teacher credentials for special Ed, because we see also where they just come out sped only.

P9 also mentioned the added requirement of a content certification SPED teachers must have. "And I don't know if it's district-specific or not, but in our district, when you have to have the content cert, what I find is a lot of the applicants do not always have a content certification."

P10 expressed her views regarding the increased certification demands in the district for SPED teachers in self-contained units:

> If we were hiring a teacher for a self-contained classroom, they had to have a second certification, general education certification. And prior to that, that was not required. And I know for a fact, not every district requires that even today. And so, I would say finding someone who has special education EC through 12, and then if they were going to be placed in a [self-contained unit] classroom, they then have to have generalist EC through 6. It's a big challenge because they can go down the road to a different district and just have the EC through 12 SPED and do whatever is needed.

P11 also commented on the challenge of increased certification demands and the limited time aspiring teachers have to complete their requirements:

> Now to hire and offer for teachers, it's difficult with the expectations that they have, the exams that they have to cover. Before, it was a lot smoother transitioned. They gave them time, and they had study sessions, and they had coursework, and they were prepared, and then they took it, and it was much smoother. After COVID, there's all these, I don't know if it's programs, but they offer, and then they give them a year and they're not able to pass these assessments because they're not, one, in the practicum, they're not doing the student teaching, and that's not their profession. So, it's extremely difficult.

Pay/Compensation

A benefit to aspiring teachers in the area is the vast amount of competing school districts, charter, and private schools. When applying for teaching positions, aspiring candidates can consider options such as location or area in the city or surrounding suburban areas, school district or entity size, available supports, benefits, and, most importantly, monetary compensation. Participants voiced their concerns about the district's pay to SPED teachers and SPED support personnel compared to other school districts and entities in the area.

P2 mentioned pay and signing bonuses as an option applicants have when looking to get employed in the area: "One is pay because they can hop around district to district and get signing bonuses and get more money." P2 stated: "the pay isn't good enough." P2 later added about the pay of SPED paraprofessionals. "You have to increase the pay of the paras, period. It's not a living wage." P4 added,

> We need more hands on deck, and they need more money. And the reason why I say that a special Ed teacher needs more money, that's stipend, that's [money amount], and then it goes up to [money amount]. It's not enough. These individuals deal with a whole lot more than just a regular Gen Ed teacher.

P5 mentioned,

> I think the other part of our barrier is money. I think that we do offer a stipend, [money amount] and then [money amount] for some of those special program stipends. But I know the amount of responsibility in layers that they have to also

> be able to do in that role. Sometimes money, they want more because of knowing what has to be done once they get into that role.

P5 later mentioned how new teachers who are hired say no to the job offer once they hear the pay they will receive:

> Or also the money thing. They could go through the process then get to the final end and offer, and they won't take it, or they'll deny it based on how much they're getting paid. Or once they really understand the full gamut of what this job role is going to look like, they may then also say no at the end."

P6 stated how compensation is a key factor in recruiting that SPED staff. "When you look at all of the responsibilities, and I think salary is also a factor in recruitment." P6 added,

> Of course, I know, too, salary makes a difference. And those are things we can't control, I understand. But I always say that one day in the future, it's going to have to change because it's too hard to get our special Ed teachers who we need desperately.

P8 mentioned how other districts in the area are in a better position to compensate their teachers: "there are districts that pay way better, that have better stipends, that have more financial ability to help teachers." P8 added,

> If you can't pay people, and that's not something we can fix even at the district level, that has to come from the state, or we have to take from others. And I don't know where you take from. And I'm not trying to say one group of teachers is better than another group of teachers by no means, because they all have their

> place. But we're moving into a world where there is no Gen Ed. Everybody is SPED at some form or fashion.

P10 expressed similar view regarding the district ability to compensate teachers against neighboring ones and its effect on recruiting:

> I've seen that it's become more of a challenge to recruit and hire special education teachers. I think that partly that is due to the fact that other districts offer a stipend for special education teachers. I know one of our neighboring districts offers, I think, [money amount] extra if you're a special education teacher, and then, I think, [money amount] extra if you're a special education teacher, and then [money amount] extra if you're a special education para. It's almost like a sign-on bonus, I think. So, I think that me and our current district have trouble competing with that because the proximity is so close that they're really not driving further to go to the other district."

P13 added: "And then we're up against area districts that are giving out stipends and extra money, and our district is not."

P9 stated that retention in high need areas can be enhanced by paying out stipends. "If there's stipends for some of our high needs areas, so then you may want to stay longer." P12 also expressed concerns with the compensation of teachers in high need areas:

> I would say the pay is not conducive to the line of work that they're doing, dealing with very high number of students, large caseloads, a lot of behaviors,

> has, I think, contributed to a lot of folks not wanting to serve in these capacities, especially in your self-continuance.

P12 later added,

> I think number one, pay. It needs to be pay. They need to be offered a special stipend that's exclusive of what other teachers are getting to entice people. Maybe they're resource teachers, maybe they're already special and certified, but they don't go into the self-contained units because the pay is the same. Maybe they get a little bit extra, like a [money amount] stipend, but they need something in the range of $10,000. If you're going to, you're going to be a self-contained teacher, you're going to get an additional $10,000 to entice people to stay.

Other Job Options for Applicants

A number of participants emphasized the fact that both current and prospective teachers have employment choices outside of SPED. P2 highlighted the options teachers and applicants have in the area:

> Again, the grass looks greener. I'm going to go to this district now. I'm going to go here, I'm going to go there, and they'll tell me that. They'll come in here and say, I don't think I'm coming back. I'm done. So, we try to support them as much as we can and provide that. But it's definitely I don't want to say a game, but they definitely have options, more so than ever before.

P6 added,

> After the pandemic, people, teachers, or those applicants, they were empowered, and they could shop more. I felt like even though I'm doing the interview, they

> know that they've got several other opportunities out there, and it made a difference.

P10 added, "I think that applicants know that there's a shortage of special education teachers. So therefore, if they are looking for a job, they can be more selective because they know that they're highly sought after."

P8 commented about options outside of education for teachers:

> But then all of a sudden, now you have multimillion dollar companies that took online to a whole new level, right? I could work from anywhere, social media. Teachers don't have to stay in the teaching world to make money. And that wasn't the case before the pandemic.

P9 spoke about how teachers are choosing to go into general education instead of SPED:

> I would say for some of the teachers, once they have that general content certification, some of them then opt to just go teach that content. So, if they have an ELA specialization or they obtain that content certification, then they just go and teach ELA instead of the special education or both.

P9 later added, "So we're going to have teachers leave because I think that's the biggest thing with COVID, is people saw what they can live with and live without and how much they can live on."

Summary

This section explained the methodology and approach used to conduct this study, including the selected research design and approach, participants and sampling

procedures, ethical considerations, data collection procedures, research questions, data analysis, and results. The salient themes from the study were the following:

- Training and supporting SPED teachers and staff are vital for their retention.
- Work-related stressors increase the likelihood of SPED teacher attrition.
- Extreme student behavior and diverse needs make SPED environments overwhelming for SPED teachers and staff.
- Post-pandemic scarcity of SPED-certified applicants is hindering the recruitment of SPED teachers.

The next section will cover information specific to the project.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

This study aimed to gain school and district leaders' perceptions regarding the difficulties of recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings indicated that four factors may hinder the recruitment or retention of teachers: the need for training and support of SPED teachers, work-related stressors, student behavioral challenges and other needs, and the lack of available SPED-certified applicants.

As a deliverable for this project study, I developed a white paper that provides partner district upper leadership with study information, the context for the study, and recommendations to support school leaders in better recruiting and retaining SPED teachers and reducing the number of SPED vacancies. A thorough analysis of the study data and findings in synthesis related literature and recent studies were the drivers for recommendation selection.

Recommendations for the Partner District

The white paper provides partner district leadership with a series of recommendations derived from this study's findings and recent related literature. The recommendations are the following:

Provide SPED Teachers with Ongoing Training and Support on SPED Classroom Management Strategies and Managing Work-Related Stressors

Participants in this study expressed that the lack of training and support as a challenge adversely impacting SPED teacher retention. They suggest providing SPED

teachers and support staff with the training and support they need. Classroom management, especially for extreme behaviors, and other job stressors were among the barriers with more participant mentions in the study. According to Torollo et al. (2024), teachers have voiced the need for improved support and training to better fulfill the duties assigned in their roles. Nayak and Narayan (2019) emphasize the benefits of high-quality data collection and analysis to arrive to informed decision-making. Gaining clarity into their experiences, perspectives, and challenges could be a vital step in determining the right supports, thus increasing the odds to their retention.

Teachers have one of the most stressful careers (Agyapong et al., 2023). Providing support to teachers is essential since work-related stressors can increase the odds of attrition (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Participants expressed how work-related stressors such as mental health, stress, and burnout impact their SPED teacher's overall well-being and job performance, especially teachers in more challenging assignments such as behavioral and life-skills support units. One participant mentioned how she has noticed an increase in mental health concerns from her SPED teachers due to how overwhelming it has been for them to adapt to a new reality in special education. Providing support, such as training and information for teachers on recognizing and managing the adverse effects of these work-related stressors, could support their well-being at the workplace and increase the odds of their retention in the field.

Provide PD and Support Opportunities for Principals on Recognizing and Valuing Diversity in Recruitment

During interviews, study participants shared strategies they have implemented to address their challenges with recruiting and retaining SPED teachers. Despite their efforts and implemented strategies to attract prospective candidates, there are few applicants to choose from on the available SPED teacher recruiting pools. Providing PD opportunities to principals on expanding their traditional recruiting lens, also known as the "right fit" for a position, could be a possible solution to improve their recruiting efforts. To help school administrators expand their available recruiting pools, Blackmore et al. (2024) recommend professional development and support for principals to recognize the value of a diverse teaching workforce.

Providing school leaders with PD on the benefits of diversity in recruiting while also facilitating opportunities for them to discuss other work-related challenges in collaborative and safe spaces could increase their knowledge related to common problems of practice. Tipping and Dennis (2022) recommend engaging colleagues in focused interaction since these practices build collective trust and develop their individual and collective capacity. During PD sessions about the benefits of diversity in hiring and other topics, training facilitators could allow time for interaction related to the leaders' experiences and connections of the learning to their current realities as campus leaders. By providing these opportunities, the partner district and other school entities could improve on their efforts around teacher recruitment and overall development of

their leaders while providing conditions that ensure their safety and foster collective trust (Lash et al., 2024).

Explore Ways to Limit the Burden of SPED-Related Compliance Reporting for Case Managers and Limit Additions to Established SPED Unit Caps.

A concern with a high number of mentions in the study was the amount compliance-reporting case managers (SPED teachers) must complete and how this adds to the stress of their already busy role. According to Baxter and Davis (2022), one of the major SPED attrition drivers is the excessive compliance requirements SPED teachers must complete to stay compliant with IDEA and ESSA requirements. One participant expressed how the burden of paperwork and compliance on top of the already existing challenges of the job such as managing student extreme behavior affects their ability to retain teachers. Another expressed how managing these burdens is particularly difficult for newer teachers who are just trying to get their footing on the job. The partner district must explore ways to support SPED teachers in managing and reducing the impact of this compliance burden and work-related stressor.

The number of students qualified to receive special education services has increased exponentially, and that does not include the number of students still awaiting testing for suspected disabilities (Hopkins et al., 2024). One of the challenges identified by study participants was the increase in SPED caseloads due to more students needing services at their campuses. The reality of more students needing SPED services has forced the partner district to increase caseloads above the established cap for each SPED unit. With more students, teachers have more IEPs to create and implement, and more

compliance reporting to complete with the same amount of personnel assigned. Exploring ways to re-evaluate and limit the number of SPED students assigned by campus, program, and case manager could alleviate some of the stress teachers face, benefiting SPED teacher retention.

Explore Ways to Increase Compensation or Provide Incentives for Staff Serving in Hard-to-Fill SPED Assignments.

Participants in this study spoke extensively about the need for increased compensation and incentives such as stipends hard positions to fill and how the issue of compensation affect their ability to recruit and retain their teachers. One participant recommended that teachers working in self-contained units or programs receive an additional stipend in addition to their regular SPED teacher stipend. Others mentioned how the partner district is at a disadvantage when it comes to what neighboring districts are currently paying their teachers and how this disparity in compensation makes it difficult for them to recruit and retain their teachers. According to Allegretto (2022), one aspect adversely impacting the recruitment of teachers today is the disparity in compensation between individuals pursuing careers outside of education and those who choose to teach. A study participant mentioned that teachers are now more willing to look outside of teaching as a possible career change option. Factors such as low compensation and the challenges SPED teachers face in their roles do not make it an appealing choice for those looking for employment (Lee, 2025). When these factors are present, potential applicants look for other employment choices instead (Allegretto, 2022). At the same time, it is also a challenge for schools since higher-paying jobs outside of education could

entice teachers to leave the profession (Allegretto, 2022). SPED teachers could look for these opportunities, especially those employed in hard-to-fill assignments. The district must focus on improving SPED teachers' pay or providing incentives to improve their recruiting and retention efforts.

Regarding possible future research or surveys, I recommend gaining the perspectives of leaders and instructors of teacher preparation programs and difficulties to create a more robust pipeline of future SPED teachers and gathering the insights from teachers and leaders regarding the type of training and support needed the most by SPED teachers today.

Descriptions and Goals

A white paper was chosen as the project of choice in this study since the intended purpose was to communicate the findings and recommendations to the partner school district's executive leadership team. A white paper allows a researcher to outline and communicate the results of a study with a selected audience, emphasizing the salient themes and societal change recommendations of each (Olson et al., 2023). This white paper will provide the district's higher leadership with study-related information and recommendations from the four salient themes and their relation to recruiting and retention of SPED teachers. Other stakeholders, such as district-level leaders, school administrators, teacher preparation program coordinators, and educators from different institutions, could also benefit from the contents in this white paper. This white paper includes the following six sections: introduction, background to the problem, methodology, results/findings, recommendations, and conclusion (Appendix A).

Rationale

White papers, when formatted appropriately, can be used to effectively communicate researcher findings in an informative and persuasive manner (Belnavis, 2024). My rationale for selecting this white paper project was to provide partner district leaders with information related to my research and my recommendations for better recruitment and retention of SPED teachers post-COVID-19. Through this qualitative study, four central themes emerged from the analysis of data: (1) training and supporting SPED teachers and staff are vital for their retention, (2) work-related stressors increase the likelihood of SPED teacher attrition, (3) extreme student behavior and diverse needs make SPED environments overwhelming for SPED teachers and staff, and (4) post-pandemic scarcity of SPED-certified applicants is hindering the recruitment of SPED teachers. Themes 1, 2, and 3 align with difficulties in retention, while theme 4 aligns with recruiting challenges.

The findings of this study revealed that school leaders perceived that training and support of SPED teachers was insufficient, This appeared to be the most significant challenge expressed by the leaders. All 13 participants had at least one mention related to the need for better training and support for SPED staff. Participants tied the lack of training and support to their ability to fill SPED positions and ensure teacher retention. References to the need for training and support were coded 76 times across all the interviews, doubling the subsequent themes in mentions.

Twelve of the 13 participants (92%) had at least one reference or mention for each of the remaining three themes (themes 2 through 4). Theme 2, work-related stressors, was

coded 45 times, with more than half the mentions related to increased student caseload numbers after the pandemic. Theme 3 (extreme student behavior challenges and other student needs) had 44 mentions from 12 participants, with more than a third (77%) related to behavioral challenges from students and challenges in behavioral self-contained units. The final theme (scarcity of SPED applicants) also had 44 mentions from 12 participants, with nearly half (48%) related to the need for better compensation.

The following section contains a thorough literature review that delves into this study's selected project type and salient themes. The findings and recommendations from this white paper could inform policy and practices of the partner district's administration (district-level and schools), human resources, and SPED departments, as well as inform the work of SPED teacher preparation programs in the area, including alternative certification programs and universities regarding recruiting and retention of SPED teachers.

Review of the Literature

The following literature review covers topics related to the project of choice in this study, which was a white paper and the latest literature on each of the salient themes of the study. Literature database sites such as Pro Quest, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and the Walden Library or Oasis provided the peer-reviewed articles in the section. I used the following keywords to access pertinent literature: *white paper, special education, training, support, work-related stressors, stress, burnout, behavioral challenges, students with disabilities, challenges, teacher attrition, recruiting,* and *retention.*

White Papers

A white paper is a document researchers use to present the findings and provide suggested recommendations to a particular group to which research may be pertinent. A white paper provides information and insights on a specific problem and recommendations derived from the insights of study participants (Wells-Mullins, 2020). A white paper is a document of choice to inform and provide recommendations to an audience, such as an organization's top-level leadership, about a topic of interest (Johnson, 2020). The purpose of selecting a white paper as a deliverable for this study was to present the district upper leadership with recommendations to help improve their recruiting and retention of SPED teachers in their schools. According to Granada (2020, as cited in Belnavis, 2024), although white papers were primarily used for government-related purposes, today, they are used in various other contexts related to policy and providing alternative or solution recommendations to existing problems. Thus, selecting a white paper for this project is appropriate and aligned with the document's primary purpose.

Recruitment and Retention of SPED Teachers

Although SPED has historically dealt with a teacher shortage problem (Singer, 1992, as cited in Gilmour et al., 2025), staffing challenges have increased in the last few years (Gilmour et al., 2025). Not having certified teachers available to cover existing vacancies places schools and their students at risk (Nguyen et al., 2024). Improved recruiting strategies and support for new hires are essential to keep SPED positions filled and ensure successful careers in teaching (Budin, 2024).

SPED teachers not only have the difficult responsibility of providing instruction to students with disabilities but also must comply with many other job requirements. SPED teachers must navigate the requirements of providing differentiated instruction and services to their students while meeting compliance requirements such as job-related paperwork, attending meetings, and others (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Such demands and responsibilities require SPED teachers to receive on-the-job training and support opportunities from in-school trainers, supported by field experts, and enhanced by some form of off-campus education program on best practices and strategies (Rodriguez-Oramas et al., 2021). Teachers feel they can do better at their jobs if they receive appropriate training, resources, and a better level of support (Torollo et al. 2024). In the same way, the findings of this study overwhelmingly highlight the need for continuous training and support for SPED teachers and other SPED support staff, and the role these may play in their retention. Better training in behavior management and compliance related duties were among the areas participants identified as challenges for SPED teachers. It is critical that administrators ensure a manageable workload for their SPED teachers and provide consistent support to help them avoid burnout (Brunsting et al., 2025). Allowing SPED teachers to continue serving in settings that are similar to their pre-training or field experience is a high predictor of their retention (Backes et al., 2025). These supportive measures could help reduce SPED teacher attrition in our schools.

One challenge this study's participants identified as a reason for low applicant numbers is the lack of adequate compensation for SPED teachers. The difference in compensation between teachers and other professionals is significant (Allegretto, 2022).

According to a study by Lee (2025), special education teachers' compensation and working conditions are insufficient to entice them to join a preparation program and complete all certification requirements. Blackmore et al. (2024) recommend better allocating financial resources and incentives for recruiting hard-to-staff schools and areas. As it is vital to provide better compensation for SPED teachers, it is equally important for leaders to consider other non-monetary incentives such as improve working spaces and conditions (Shaoan et al., 2025).

Participants in this study expressed how compensation, such as salaries and stipends, should be determined based on each position's required duties, expectations, and complexity. Although beyond the control of school leaders, a challenge impacting recruiting today is the decline in enrollment experienced by teacher preparation programs (Day et al., 2024). The findings by Lee (2025) related to the need for better compensation could be an incentive to improving the enrollment numbers of individuals in teacher preparation programs. Incentivizing SPED certification and differentiating compensation based on the expectations for each role could make SPED a more appealing career choice for those looking at teaching as a potential career choice.

Countries with the highest student diversity have struggled in providing a teacher workforce that is proportional to their student population (Yip & Xu, 2024). In the United States, school districts have not been well-equipped to address the needs for diversity in staffing at their campuses (Lee, 2025). Yip and Xu (2024) recommend that districts and school entities have systems in place to review student and teachers demographics and ensure better outcomes in this area. Additionally, Blackmore et al. (2024) recommend

professional development and support for principals focused on recognizing the value of diversity in recruiting teachers. According to Blackmore (2024), Looking for the “right fit” has been a common practice in teacher recruiting. Moving beyond this practice and embracing the benefits of diversifying teacher recruiting could be an alternative to reducing the high number of vacancies in school districts today, especially in SPED.

Another critical challenge outside of the control of school leaders which was mentioned by most participants in the study is how the state's increased certification requirements or demands may be limiting today's recruiting pools. According to Theobald et al. (2021), dual certification requirements for SPED may push prospective teaching candidates to areas outside SPED where dual certification is also required. If states find ways to lower certification requirements for those interested in teaching in SPED self-contained positions, recruitment numbers could increase for those roles. Another proven practice to increase the odds of individuals completing certification requirements is to assign a cooperating teacher to individuals in teacher preparation programs since there is a correlation between this practice and the chance of them entering SPED teaching (Theobald et al., 2021).

Compliance Reporting and Other Work-Related Stressors

Study participants found the demands of compliance reporting expectations to be drivers of teacher stress and burnout in the role. Leaders recognize how paperwork and compliance requirements are also impacting the decisions of prospective candidates wanting to start SPED careers (Sack, 2021, as cited in Baxter & Devlin, 2022). According to Blasko et al. (2024), teachers surveyed did not feel adequately prepared to

write IEPs and felt that the training they receive is inadequate. Unfortunately, as it does to teacher retention, compliance reporting requirements such as IEP writing may also impact the prospects of recruiting SPED teachers.

The partner district utilizes a technology-based platform to keep track of SPED compliance reporting requirements. Although SPED teachers utilized technology-based platforms- and programs before and after the pandemic period (Starks & Reich, 2023), a gap in usage efficacy still exists from teacher to teacher. Ongoing training and support for SPED teachers on the district's compliance platform and its features is essential to alleviate some of their work-related stress related to compliance requirements and the time this area of their work requires. SPED teachers witnessed the struggles the pandemic brought to their work related to technology integration in learning and other usage purposes (Starks & Reich, 2023). At the very least, the partner district must plan for ongoing training sessions or learning labs on their new program.

As expressed by study participants, the number of students assigned to each SPED teacher or case manager, which is known as the student caseload, has increased drastically in the last few years. A study by Miller (2024) reported how large student caseloads increase the time needed for documentation and compliance-related duties and reduce the time they spend with children, which strains their physical and mental health. Rosser (2024) states that assigning students to caseloads could be a problem for high-level district administrators since they may not be aware of the actual needs of every child. This problem is common when assigning students to district-level self-contained

units housed at campuses. Rosser (2024) recommends evaluating existing processes for assigning students to caseloads to ensure the load for each teacher is manageable.

One of this study's participants mentioned how one of the questions SPED applicants ask after an interview is how many students they will be responsible for. These inquiries from applicants are a perfect example of how increased caseloads directly impact school leaders' ability to recruit SPED teachers. Participants also spoke extensively about the huge discrepancies or gaps between the number of SPED teacher allocations and the number of students assigned to schools. This reality causes overload in cases, leading to burnout of current SPED teachers, as stated by Miller (2024).

The high demands of SPED could adversely impact SPED teachers' mental health and their well-being, especially during the post-pandemic years. Although all SPED teachers struggle with meeting the many demands of the role, teachers in their 4th to 10th year of service in SPED were found to experience even more challenges than teachers in their first 3 years of service (Molina, 2024). This data underpins the importance of continued support for SPED teachers beyond just the first years of service to ensure their retention. For new SPED teachers, assigning a mentor to support with the challenges of the role including managing student cases and compliance reporting could improve their level of job satisfaction and their retention (Deger et al., 2024). With the right support systems in place, teachers could limit the impact of the stress the experience in their roles.

A participant mentioned that after COVID-19 she has seen an increase in mental-related concerns who have led to increases in leave/absence requests. SPED teachers

reported that part of the stress and anxiety comes from knowing they may not be doing enough to meet the needs of their assigned students (Soini et al., 2019, as cited in Howard, 2022). Timely strategies to support teachers in managing the demands of the role could not only benefit the odds of their retention but could have other benefits, such as improved workplace climate, healthier and happier teachers, and improved student outcomes (Sumrall, 2024).

SPED Classroom Management

Study participants identified extreme behaviors as one of the biggest challenges of recruiting and retaining SPED teachers, especially in behavioral support units. Serving SPED students, especially those in behavioral support classrooms, require teachers to have at least a basic level of understanding of classroom management best practices. The level of teacher ability to perform their assigned duties or self-efficacy, and their wellbeing at work are found to have an effect on their retention in the classroom (Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025). School leaders should focus on providing these teachers with the skills needed to manage these learning settings. Training and support in classroom management could increase the likelihood of SPED teacher retention at their schools.

According to the Office of SPED Programs (2020, as cited in Stark et al. 2022), the number of students ages 3 to 21 with an emotional disturbance-related disability exceeds 350,000, and about a third are assigned to receive support in a behavioral-self-contained unit. SPED teachers serving students in behavioral support units experience a sense of pride and fulfillment when providing instruction and helping these students

succeed academically (Stark et al., 2022). In contrast, negative feelings, stress, and exhaustion result from dealing with their students' behavioral and emotional needs (Stark et al., 2022).

Managing these extreme behaviors and emotional outbursts from these students causes a great deal of stress and mental anguish for SPED teachers, who have to experience this reality daily (Stark et al., 2022). Applying appropriate interventions and managing these students' behavioral, social, and emotional needs require a differentiated and targeted approach that is difficult for teachers to implement effectively (Chen et al., 2021). As stated by this study's participants, these role-related burdens increase exhaustion, anxiety, and work-related stress that could play a role in their desire to leave the classroom or at least serve in this type of SPED setting.

Ensuring teachers are knowledgeable in implementing research-based strategies to manage student behaviors is essential (Hart et al., 2025). Leaders' awareness of burnout in SPED behavioral support teachers and the potential adverse effects on teachers' well-being is essential to providing appropriate support and improving the odds of their retention in these extremely challenging school settings (Gilmour et al., 2022). Developing teachers' self-efficacy in managing behaviors from pre-service to the classroom may improve teachers' recruiting and retention while supporting the re-integration of SPED students to the general classroom setting (Hart et al., 2025).

Two recommendations to improve teachers' classroom management skills are for administrators to provide in-service professional development on best classroom management practices and ongoing feedback and support on implementing these

practices in the classroom (Moore et al., 2024). Moore et al. (2024) encourage school administrators to prioritize their learning around best practices in classroom and behavior management so that they can lead systemic campus improvements in this area.

Project Description

The project consists of a white paper in which I will present the partner district's upper leadership with recommendations for improved recruiting and retention of SPED teachers. After thorough analysis of the study's findings, I searched for recent articles and research studies related to each of the 4 final themes. A synthesis of the information from recent articles, challenges identified and with most mentions, recommendations and strategies shared by participants, and areas of possible control by the partner-school district were the catalyst for recommendation selection. Recommendations are connected to the study's purpose by emerging from the perspectives of participants on challenges and suggested strategies to improve recruiting or retaining SPED teachers in their school district.

The recommendations for the partner district are the following: Provide SPED teachers with ongoing training and support on SPED classroom management strategies and managing work-related stressors; provide PD and support opportunities for principals on recognizing and valuing diversity in recruitment; explore ways to limit the burden of SPED-related compliance reporting for case managers and limit additions to established SPED unit caps; and explore ways to increase compensation or provide incentives for staff serving in hard-to-fill SPED assignments. Recommendations for research include gaining the perspectives of leaders and instructors of teacher preparation programs and

difficulties to create a more robust pipeline of future SPED teachers and gathering the insights from teachers and leaders regarding the type of training and support needed the most by SPED teachers today.

The partner district's budget shortfall is a potential barrier to recommendation implementation. Offering more competitive salaries for hard-to-fill positions such as SPED teachers and decreasing the teacher-to-student ratios are complicated undertakings under the district's financial situation, which is normal for most public school districts in the state today. Another barrier regarding support to campuses and SPED teachers is that the partner district's SPED department is small for a district that is among the largest in the state. A team of under 10 district leaders is currently responsible for supporting over 80 campuses. The white paper's content includes all recommendations and barriers. The white paper finishes with a conclusion section summarizing all crucial points covered and closing the paper.

Project Evaluation Plan

I plan to evaluate the project after the release of the white paper to the intended audience. Partner district leaders will receive a white paper summarizing all study aspects, including recommendations for possible implementation and improvement of the identified local problem. As Thomas (2017) recommends, the evaluation does not begin until full project completion.

A white paper was the project deliverable of choice because it allowed the researcher to provide pertinent information and recommended solutions to a particular audience, in this case, the executive leadership team of the partner school district.

Evaluating the quality of the project by surveying the selected audience is an essential last step in this process. Therefore, as part of the white paper, district upper leadership personnel will receive evaluative tools to inform the researcher about the quality of the product or project delivered.

I will evaluate the project in two different ways: (1) providing white paper recipients with a Likert-type scale survey with questions related to the quality of the information received, the presentation format, and the potential impact for change of the recommendations received; and by providing recipients with a questions/clarification form that will be attached to the white paper as a way to gauge the clarity of content presented and provide recipients an opportunity to get any clarification needed. Thomas (2017) states that a Likert scale allows respondents to rate their agreement with a researcher's claims about attitudes, beliefs, or traits. Appendix A includes a sample of the Likert-Scale questionnaire and the questions/clarification forms for white paper recipients.

Project Implications

The recommendations provided in the white paper could close a practice gap by providing school administrators at all levels and district-level leaders with a greater understanding of the factors that continue driving teacher recruitment and retention following the COVID-19 epidemic, particularly in SPED school settings. Although COVID school closures and reopening occurred nearly half a decade ago, the effects of such a period continue to affect the education landscape today. The insights gathered from the perspectives of leaders at each level not only inform the content of the white

paper but could benefit all stakeholders by informing them of their work in optimizing structures and practices that will allow a much smoother and more effective recruitment and retention of SPED teachers during teacher prospect scarcity. The success of SPED is dependent on the effectiveness of processes to recruit, develop, support, and retain teachers and other support personnel (Kamman et al., 2021). The study findings could be vital for leaders as they develop plans to recruit new staff in the post-pandemic SPED classroom and provide the necessary support to SPED teachers to succeed in their roles, increasing retention chances.

This study ensures social change by focusing on strategies that will allow school and district leaders the potential and ability to provide SPED students an equal opportunity to high-quality instruction by ensuring each classroom or unit is staffed with a highly qualified SPED teacher, as required by IDEA. Ensuring the full staffing of SPED vacancies is essential to meeting IEP instructional and compliance requirements. The white paper provides district upper leadership with recommendations to improve their processes toward accomplishing such outcomes.

Other stakeholders, including educators, students, parents, and the community, may also gain from district-wide increases in SPED staffing. A highly qualified and certified SPED teacher in every classroom or SPED unit would benefit grade-level teams and allow schools to improve student achievement. Knowing that their children would receive better SPED services as per IEPs gives parents peace of mind about their child's education. Communities do better long-term when their schools produce positive student outcomes.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

This study addressed a gap in practice by gathering the perspectives of those directly in charge of hiring or supporting the process and providing partner district leaders with recommendations for improving the current problem with recruiting and retention of SPED teachers. The project offers insights into the existing challenges and recommendations that could support the efforts to fill SPED vacancies at a higher rate. Current literature and similar studies focus primarily on teachers' perspectives and experiences on how COVID-19 affected today's classroom and the overall education landscape (Bill et al., 2022; Dillard, 2023; Gillani et al., 2022; Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Kauffman et al., 2022; Melloy & Murry, 2021; Woo et al., 2023).

A strength of this project is its focus on SPED. As indicated in the literature review section, COVID-19 has exacerbated the ongoing problem of a nationwide shortage of teachers (Bauerlein & Koh, 2020; Jackson & Bowdon, 2020; Kamman et al., 2021; Koran, 2022). Very few studies focused on or addressed the effects of the pandemic on recruiting and retaining SPED teachers (Brunsting et al., 2024; Burstein et al., 2023; Dillard, 2023; Kamman et al., 2021; Kauffman et al., 2022; Koran, 2022). This study adds to the existing body of literature through the unique perspective of school and district leaders.

An additional strength of the project is that it addresses a high-priority area for the district, which parallels the work of a newly formed district-wide committee that focuses on improving teachers' recruitment and retention. This committee does not target a

particular group or sector of teachers. This study, conversely, focused solely on SPED, which has been one of the toughest, if not the toughest, areas for school leaders to staff. The project findings will provide more specific information about district leaders' perspectives regarding recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, it will also enhance and guide the district's committee's recruiting and retention work.

The project also has its limitations. The first one is that the requirement to mask district-identifiable information would not allow me to disclose the name of individual self-contained units since some of the information shared by participants was pertinent to each of these units' unique needs. Such information could have benefited SPED leaders as they worked to improve working conditions for staff members in each self-contained unit. However, the information presented in the white paper will still give leaders information to address the challenges brought up by participants and begin making needed improvements in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers.

The final limitation of the project is related to the timing of project completion compared to the work of the district's recruiting and retention committee. The proposal for this study began about 16 months before the recruiting and retention task committee was formed. The project deliverable of providing a white paper with recommendations to district upper leadership may not align with the district’s committee recommendations timeline. However, given that the recruiting and retention committee's work is still ongoing, the plan to deliver the findings of this study may have to be adjusted to be done in conjunction with or in addition to the committee's findings.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Gaining insight into the experiences of staff in settings outside of SPED resources and in-class support is the first recommendation for a future study. Findings were consistent regarding the struggles of personnel assigned to these units in dealing with the higher level of need these students bring to their classrooms. The challenges expressed by participants regarding these settings align with themes 2 and 3 of the study.

Another recommendation is to conduct a similar study to gain the perspectives of leaders and instructors of teacher preparation programs at the college level and alternative certification programs related to the difficulties in preparing a more robust pipeline of prospective SPED teachers. Theme 4 of the study highlights the lack of highly qualified/certified SPED teaching applicants. Universities and alternative certification programs are the two main teacher pipelines for state school districts and charter programs. Exploring their challenges in producing a more significant number of certified SPED teacher prospects could be a long-term beneficial step for all school districts in the state.

The final recommendation, which addresses Theme 1 of this study, would be to collect information from teachers and school leaders on the type of training and support needed by SPED staff during the post-pandemic years. Such insights could inform the partner school district, other school districts and institutions, and teacher preparation programs as they coordinate professional development, on-site support, and resources required to prepare SPED teachers and supporting staff more effectively. The needs may vary across districts and institutional entities; however, leaders in SPED and

policymakers could use these insights to establish a baseline for basic training and support requirements.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

As a first-time researcher engaging in a project of this magnitude over the last two years, I have gained valuable insight into my abilities to plan, design, research, collaborate, and execute—skills I had only sporadically utilized throughout my professional career. Witnessing the evolution of this project from the initial idea shared with my chair to overcoming daily challenges in building a high-quality proposal and progressing through each stage to study completion has taught me a great deal about my potential when I fully commit and persevere through challenges.

Although I have always had ideas for improving areas in the field of education and worked to support students and the working conditions for staff under my charge, it was not until much later in my career that I decided to take this significant step. There were many moments of frustration in which I felt I would never reach the end. This topic was my second attempt, as I could not get past the proposal stage with my first topic several years ago.

Returning to this lifelong goal after 3 years with a new topic and seeing it through to completion taught me more about myself than I had ever known. Throughout the process, I quickly recognized some of the gaps in knowledge I needed to address to move through the stages of this project successfully. I utilized all Walden available support materials, asked questions, read dissertation/research-related books and articles, watched videos, and downloaded online resources—anything to meet the requirements for writing

this capstone project and conducting a high-quality study. I was committed about driving this research study to completion this second time.

I grew confidence as I made strides and small gains, which, in turn, improved my attitude and commitment to achieving this goal. I learned about my biases and developed a higher awareness and sensitivity to those who continue to deal with the challenges in the field brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially SPED staff, and school administrators. Undoubtedly, the learning I have acquired throughout the process, and more importantly, what I have learned about myself, makes me a better leader, educator, and overall professional and individual today.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

As an educator and father of a child with autism, I have learned and witnessed the importance of adults who dedicate their careers and lives to serving children and adults with special needs. As an educator, I saw firsthand the negative impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on education, from school closings in March of 2020 to a return to online and hybrid instruction and later to in-person instruction. The pandemic impacted all school life areas since we all returned to serving children in a new reality. SPED was one of the most adversely affected areas. The available literature on the pandemic's effect on education and the findings of this study paint a much different reality than the one we had before this once-in-a-lifetime event.

As a school principal, I struggled, like many other school leader peers, with the challenge of unfilled SPED vacancies for extended periods. These ongoing vacancies burden our ability to provide the high-quality services that my SPED students were

entitled to receive. This struggle, which I learned many other school leaders were also facing, catalyzed this study. This study captures the experiences of those school and district leaders who directly support hiring SPED teachers. The perspectives of these leaders provide context to the problem researched and are critical to understanding the broader effects of teacher vacancies in schools in this new era of education.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Although school leaders are responsible for staffing available teaching positions and ensuring a working environment and climate conducive to the retention of teachers, rarely is their input solicited regarding challenges and ways to improve this critical area in our schools. This study allowed school leaders and district leaders supporting the process to express their perceptions of challenges and experiences navigating recruitment and retention of SPED teachers during such a unique period in education. Reeves et al. (2021) recommend more studies into factors influencing individuals' decisions to become SPED teachers. Such insights could provide more clarity on ways to improve their recruitment. The insights from participant leaders indicated that lack of training and support, job-related stressors, extreme behavior, and other student needs, coupled with a lack of certified applicants, are the major salient themes related to difficulties recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. Awareness by educational leaders about these challenges could be crucial in how leaders view and approach their work of preparing aspiring SPED teaching candidates and how leaders support those teachers currently serving in SPED classrooms or roles.

This study contributes to positive change in society and at the local level. High levels of teacher attrition adversely impact students' learning (Greer Koch, 2024). Therefore, reducing the number of existing SPED vacancies will allow schools to provide SPED students with ongoing, high-quality, and differentiated services to SPED students as required by federal law and as indicated in their IEPs. Better individualized services and instruction for students with disabilities increase their chances of a better future as they continue schooling, careers, and life.

This study validated the theory tenets by Maslow (1943) and Herzberg (1966). There was congruency between the participants' responses and Herzberg's hygiene factors or factors that may lead to job discontent, which may adversely impact SPED teacher retention. Study themes or subcategories, such as the lack of training and support, work-related stressors such as increased student caseloads and paperwork, and the need for better compensation parallel to Herzberg's (1966) theory. As for Maslow's (1943) hierarchical needs theory, especially safety needs, participants expressed concerns related to the safety of teachers and staff due to the extreme behaviors from students and, regarding mental safety, the issues related to burnout and stress from staff members due to a new reality in SPED witnessed after the pandemic.

Participants expressed their perspectives regarding what they considered to be difficulties in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic in the partner school district. The findings derived from the collected data could be essential in developing curriculum for teacher preparation programs such as universities and alternative certification programs in SPED. Given that most participants were principals,

the insights from this study could also benefit other principals in highlighting the challenges in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers in the post-COVID era from their unique perspectives.

This study allowed partner-district leaders to express their perspectives regarding the difficulties in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers post-COVID-19 pandemic. The study addresses current research gaps since most related studies focus on teacher experiences, not leaders. Future qualitative studies could explore the challenges of teachers in self-contained units, the perspectives of teacher preparation program leaders in challenges to producing more SPED teacher-ready applicants, and lastly, collecting information from SPED teachers on the type of training and support they believe they need the most, which addresses the theme with more mentions in this study.

Conclusion

Recruiting and retaining SPED teachers post-COVID-19 has been challenging for school and district leaders responsible for ensuring highly qualified/certified SPED teachers in every classroom or unit supporting students with special needs or disabilities. Nearly half a decade after the COVID-related school closures, the effects of the pandemic continue to affect schools today, especially in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers. The study highlighted four main barriers related to SPED teachers' recruiting and retention from the perspective of these leaders. These barriers were the need for training and support of SPED teachers; work-related stressors such as paperwork/compliance, increased caseloads, and mental/burnout/stress; extreme student behavior challenges and other student needs; and scarcity of highly qualified/certified applicants. The findings

provide leaders with detailed insights from the perceptions of other leaders on the most pressing difficulties related to recruiting and retaining SPED teachers in the post-COVID-19 years. Awareness of these barriers and insights is vital for school and district leaders as they plan to support SPED teachers currently serving and for entities such as universities and alternate certification programs as they prepare the next crop of special educators.

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Appendix A: The Project

White Paper

Recommendations for Improving the Recruiting and Retention of Special Education Teachers Post-COVID 19

by

Framy Diaz

Introduction

Teacher attrition, especially the type witnessed after the COVID-19 pandemic, continues to affect schools and their students nationwide (Devers et al., 2024). Special education (SPED) has been one of most impacted areas, as schools face ongoing challenges to keep SPED teachers in the classroom (Sumrall, 2024). Like many other school districts in the region and the nation, the partner school district in this study continues to face difficulties with ensuring a highly qualified and state-certified SPED teacher in every classroom or related assignment. As of 2025, 205 out of 1,803 (11.4%) of SPED positions remain vacant in the partner school district. Ninety-five out of 845 (11.2%) of these vacancies are for SPED teacher positions. These many vacancies hinder the partner district's goal of delivering equitable and high-quality instruction to all its students. Despite implementing initiatives to boost recruiting and retention in hard-to-fill areas, the difficulties related to recruiting and retention in SPED continue as the partner district prepares to launch the 2025-2026 school year. A recently created district recruiting and retention taskforce comprised of district-level and campus leaders is currently working on strategies to boost recruiting in the district. However, their work is not particular or solely focused on SPED teacher recruiting. The recommendations in this white paper could supplement and inform the work of this committee.

This study aimed to gain the perspectives of school leaders, such as principals and district-level leaders supporting retention efforts, regarding the difficulties in recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. Since most related literature focuses on the perspective of teachers, this study focused only on the perspectives of

leaders in charge of the hiring process and retention of current SPED teachers. Participants included a combination of partner district elementary and secondary-level principals and leaders from the SPED and Human Resources departments. The following research question was the catalyst for this study: Why do leaders in the school district continue to face difficulties with recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic period?

Local Problem

At the local level, the inability of school leaders to fill the large numbers of SPED vacancies in their respective schools could likely be adversely affecting not only the quality of instruction and services provided to their SPED students but also their ability to meet their IEP compliance requirements as per IDEA. This causes other disruptions in day-to-day operations since principals must then rely on unconventional approaches such as removing staff members from other vital areas or duties to cover classrooms or using substitute teachers, both of whom are likely unprepared to provide IEP services to the level of fidelity required, especially when supporting self-contained behavioral support units.

Summary of the Study

This study was conducted in a local school district to address a problem with excessive vacancies in special education. School leaders were interviewed to provide their perspectives regarding what they consider to be the toughest challenges school face to keep SPED vacancies filled year round. The study's research question allowed the researcher to collect information on participants' perspectives on the difficulties with

recruiting and retaining SPED teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through each of the eight interview questions, the researcher captured information related to current vacancies, perceived challenges to SPED teacher recruitment and retention, main differences between the pre and post-pandemic periods, strategies leaders have implemented in dealing with SPED vacancies, recommended changes and support, and their recommendations to school leaders experiencing similar challenges.

After receiving approval from Walden University IRB and the partner district's Department of Research and Development, candidates who met the study criteria were invited via email and received information pertinent to the study. The ideal sample and goal for this type of research was 9 to 18 participants. The researcher coded the data manually to ensure each aligned participant mention or reference was marked and classified correctly under similar code groupings. As Thomas (2017) recommended, I applied a constant comparative approach to evaluate coded phrases and paragraphs against other pieces across all 13 interview transcripts. The researcher used an inductive analysis to group codes into larger code groupings or clusters (Bhattacharya, 2017). Codes or code groupings that received the most mentions moved on to the next rounds as possible emerging themes. Some of the identified clusters became the study's final themes through the constant comparative approach. In contrast, codes or clusters mentioned in isolation or not by most of the participants were not considered significant or prevailing, thus not moving to the next round of emerging themes. Codes related to the need for training and support, work-related stressors, behavioral challenges and behavioral units, and lack of applicants were by far the most referenced.

Study Findings

The researcher arrived at four central findings or themes through this qualitative study. Themes 1, 2, and 3 highlight difficulties with retention, while theme 4 highlights challenges related to recruiting SPED teachers.

Project Study Themes

- **Training and supporting SPED teachers and staff are vital for their retention**.
- **Work-related stressors increase the likelihood of SPED teacher attrition**.
- **Extreme student behavior and diverse needs make SPED environments overwhelming for SPED teachers and staff**.
- **Post-pandemic scarcity of SPED-certified applicants is hindering the recruitment of SPED teachers**.

Theme 1: Training and supporting SPED teachers and staff are vital for their retention. All participants mentioned challenges related to the lack of training and support of SPED teachers and support personnel. Participants expressed that the unpreparedness of SPED teachers and staff to perform their daily duties and expectations is a primary driver of teacher attrition, especially in self-contained units such as those that offer behavioral and life-skills support to students. There were 76 related mentions for theme 1, doubling each other subsequent theme in interview references. Participant mentions fell in one of the following categories: need for training, need for district-level support, need for campus-level support, or need for strategic scheduling. The need for training

received nearly half of the mentions, highlighting the importance of planning and delivering high-quality professional development opportunities for SPED teachers and support staff. The need for district-level support was the next most mentioned subtheme in theme 1. District-level support encompasses teacher visits by program managers and other experienced SPED leaders to provide feedback and coaching on best practices to educate and serve students with disabilities.

Theme 2: Work-related stressors increase the likelihood of SPED teacher attrition. Twelve out of 13 participants (92%) made at least one reference related to how work-related stressors are another driver for teachers wanting to leave their roles as SPED teachers. Work-related stressors encompass the struggles of teachers dealing with paperwork/compliance issues, increased student caseloads, and mental/burnout/stress issues. Work-related stressors were coded 45 times, with more than half the mentions related to the burdens of increased student caseload numbers after the pandemic. Due to the many mentions of extreme behavior from students and challenges in behavioral support units, a separate theme (theme 3) was created outside of this theme. The first subtheme in theme 2 (paperwork/compliance) refers to the challenges SPED teachers experience dealing with duties outside of direct instruction and services, such as attending ARD meetings, working on IEPs, and other role-specific requirements. Increased caseloads refer to more students being assigned to each SPED teacher or case manager, a reality in SPED after the pandemic. Mental health/burnout/stress refers to how the many requirements of the role affect the overall well-being and health of SPED teachers.

Theme 3: Extreme student behavior and diverse needs make SPED environments overwhelming for SPED teachers and staff. Per participants ' responses, extreme student behavior, especially in behavioral units, is the most challenging work-related stressor SPED teachers endure after COVID-19. A separate theme emerged, outside of theme 2, due to the high number of references during the interviews. As for theme 2, 12 out of 13 participants (92%) had at least one related mention of this topic. This theme alone was referenced 44 times, with more than a third (77%) of the responses referencing behavioral challenges from students and challenges in behavioral self-contained units. More than a third (77%) of the cases were related to behavioral challenges from students and challenges in behavioral self-contained units. Participants highlighted how they have seen a stark contrast not only with the number of behavioral outbursts and other instances from students after the pandemic but also a higher percentage of students displaying extreme behaviors at school. Principals mentioned how behavioral units are the hardest to keep filled with teachers and that if they are lucky to find a teacher to take these jobs, they do not last long and end up resigning. Participants connected the challenge associated with managing extreme behaviors not only teacher retention but also the recruitment of prospective SPED applicants. About a quarter of the mentions (23%) in this theme related to other student needs outside of behavior, such as academic gaps and regression, emotional needs, lack of stamina, and social needs. Data from the study indicate that extreme behaviors, especially in behavioral self-contained units, are precursors of teacher exhaustion and stress. Extreme behaviors may be significant drivers of teacher attrition in SPED.

Theme 4: Post-pandemic scarcity of SPED-certified applicants is hindering the recruitment of SPED teachers. The final salient theme had 44 references from 12 out of 13 (92%) participants. Nearly half of the mentions (48%) addressed the need for better compensation for SPED teachers and paraprofessionals. Participants expressed frustration for not having a viable pool or pipeline of SPED teacher applicants available to hire for their open vacancies, especially for behavioral support positions. They mentioned that the lack of availability forces them to lower the standards for hiring. Before the pandemic, the availability of SPED teaching position applicants, although not optimal, was better than in recent years. Another subtheme referenced was how the state increased the SPED certification criteria, especially at a time when finding teachers, not just SPED-certified ones, is a challenge for school administrators. One participant emphasized that before COVID, having a second certification to teach in a self-contained SPED classroom was not required, which is no longer the case today. Participants also mentioned that applicants today have other options outside of SPED. They can go into many different educational roles without needing multiple certifications and having to pass more certification tests. Participants highlighted how job opportunities outside of education may affect current SPED applicant pools. These opportunities may also entice current teachers to leave teaching as working conditions in SPED become more challenging.

The next section provides the partner district with 4 practical recommendations that if implemented could help reduce the number of open SPED vacancies and ensure higher quality services to their identified students with disabilities. These

recommendations are derived from a thorough analysis of this study's findings and related recent literature.

Recommendations

- **Provide SPED teachers with Ongoing Training and Support on SPED Classroom Management Strategies and Managing Work-Related Stressors**
- **Provide PD and Support Opportunities for Principals on Recognizing and Valuing Diversity in Teacher Recruiting**
- **Explore ways to limit the burden of SPED-related compliance reporting for case managers and limit additions to established SPED unit caps**
- **Explore ways to increase compensation or provide incentives for staff serving in hard-to-fill assignments**

Provide SPED teachers with Ongoing Training and Support on SPED Classroom Management Strategies and Managing Work-Related Stressors

The theme most mentioned in this study was the need for training and support of SPED teachers, which is vital to their retention. These supports are essential because according to Gilmour et al. (2025), SPED teachers without the skills to perform their duties effectively are more likely to leave their roles. Implementing a PD and support plan that aligns with the expressed needs of study participants could enhance SPED staff preparedness to deal with the challenges they currently face in their schools and assigned settings or roles. To ensure teachers receive adequate classroom and behavioral management training, it is encouraged that administrators continue their learning around best practices in this area to ensure they have the skillset to train teachers and lead

systemic improvement in behavior management at their schools (Moore et al., 2024). Aside of training, it is recommended to assign a mentor to new teachers for support with all SPED-related duties (Deger et al., 2024). The requirements of the SPED role could be overwhelming for them. Therefore, to ensure their retention, this additional level of support may be necessary.

Recruiting and retaining SPED teachers can be improved by ensuring they are well-equipped to manage the behaviors they will encounter in their classrooms (Hart et al., 2025). The district could develop and send a survey to teachers in those settings that allow for the reporting of their most pressing challenges. An online survey could be a quick inexpensive was for the district to collect this data, as Nayak and Narayan (2019) recommend. By gathering such information, the district could plan and deliver PD and support teachers based on their day-to-day needs and experiences in those settings. Tailoring the support to the actual needs of teachers could positively impact their retention.

According to Agyapong et al. (2023), stress management techniques such as mindfulness, yoga, and sand play could contribute to the overall well-being of teachers by reducing stress and burnout. Leaders could develop training for teachers and staff on work stress management, provide before/after school fitness classes, create peace rooms in schools, and implement other appropriate strategies.

Provide Professional Development and Support Opportunities for Principals on Recognizing and Valuing Diversity in Recruitment

School administrators ensure SPED positions are filled with highly qualified teachers. School administrators' ability to provide immediate support is critical to ensure SPED teachers feel supported at the workplace. According to Farahmandpour and Voelkel (2025), school leadership is correlated to teacher retention or turnover. They also emphasize the role of teacher self-efficacy as a predictor to their retention (Farahmandpour & Voelkel. 2025). School administrators must be ready to provide immediate support to SPED teachers when requested since SPED experts such as program managers and other SPED leaders are usually not on site when challenges arise. To provide adequate support, administrators must be equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to meet today's SPED challenges.

Looking outside of what has been considered in the past as the "right fit" may not be the best strategy to address the current shortage of teachers (Blackmore et al., 2024). Blackmore et al. (2024) recommend professional development and support for principals focused on recognizing the value of diversity in recruiting teachers. Collaborative structures such as a PLC could facilitate organizational trust and focused interaction, especially around common practice challenges (Tipping & Dennis, 2022). Engaging school administrators in professional development or PLCs in recognizing the value of having a diverse teaching workforce could be a positive step in creating a supportive environment for peers facing similar challenges, such as difficulties keeping SPED teacher positions fully staffed.

Every school leader faces the challenges of SPED, however, what they experience in their school could be very different than what is experienced in other schools. Variables such as the level of teacher experience, the type of SPED settings or units at each campus, and the individual needs of each SPED student will dictate and shape the experiences of staff at every campus. Administrators and other professionals could bring insights, experiences, and strategies that could benefit other school administrators facing similar or even distinct challenges. District leaders must plan SPED related PD opportunities for administrators and allow them to collaborate throughout the year. Some discussions must center around challenges and successes with SPED recruiting and retention, and as recommended, PD must address the benefits of diversity in teacher hiring. Support for teachers ultimately impacts their satisfaction at work and increases the odds of their retention. Helping campus leaders recognize the value of diversity in recruiting could make a difference in reducing the number of open vacancies in the district today and in the future.

Explore ways to limit the burden of SPED-related compliance reporting for case managers and limit additions to established SPED unit caps

Participants expressed that one of the most significant work-related stressors for SPED teachers or case managers is the compliance-reporting duties they must complete as part of their roles. Research indicates that the exorbitant amount of compliance work SPED teachers must complete to meet IDEA and ESSA compliance requirements is one of the most influential factors in their attrition (Baxter & Davis, 2022). Exploring ways to either minimize the amount of compliance-related work or provide SPED teachers with

time during the school day to complete these requirements could be beneficial in limiting stressors related to their role. Participants in the study expressed that teachers have communicated frustrations about using their new SPED documentation and compliance platform. The district SPED department could survey teachers and look into this new platform to determine what about the platform is causing their frustrations. Providing training and lab sessions about the new platform features could ease teachers' stress levels. School administrators could also look at their SPED master schedules and find time for each case manager to get coverage from paraprofessionals or other available staff so that they can complete compliance-related tasks.

Students continue to qualify for SPED services at large rate (Hopkins, et al., 2024). Participants in this study spoke extensively about the stress endured by case managers (SPED teachers) due to the high numbers of SPED students assigned to them. The increased SPED identifications and qualifications after the pandemic have forced the partner district and others to add students beyond the established unit cap or teacher-to-student ratio. More SPED students require more compliance related work. These burdens could lead to fatigue, burnout, and difficulty in retaining SPED teachers. Rosser (2024) recommends that school districts evaluate their processes and procedures for student caseload assignments to ensure manageable caseloads for SPED teachers.

The SPED department must closely monitor caseloads by ensuring a balance among teachers/case managers across schools and in special programs. The financial state of school districts drive the decisions regarding SPED teacher allocations and the addition of special programs. However, anything that can be done at the district level to

ensure teachers are not overburdened with more students or cases they can manage could be beneficial in ensuring their retention and mitigating possible attrition due to burnout.

Explore Ways to Increase Compensation or Provide Incentives for Staff Serving in Hard-to-Fill SPED Assignments

According to Allegretto (2022), the disparity in compensation between teachers and college-educated professionals in other fields, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, influences the decisions of college graduates to seek jobs outside of education and burdens school leaders with retaining their teachers. The same is true in SPED due to the added job requirements for SPED teachers compared to general education teachers. Blackmore et al. (2024) recommend that school districts do a better job in how they allocate budgets and prioritize funding and financial incentives for hard-to-staff areas such as SPED.

By exploring ways to incentivize SPED teachers, the partner district could improve the number of prospective applicants looking to join the district and would be in a better position to compete against neighboring school districts. If SPED teacher pay increases are not an option at the moment, compensation could include stipends based on the type of SPED assignment. Instead of having the same stipend pay for all SPED teacher roles, teachers in the hardest-to-fill positions, such as behavioral units, should receive stipend pay above every other SPED teacher group or role. The district must also take advantage of the state's Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) program by ensuring all SPED teacher roles are part of a participating cohort. The district could also establish a teacher retention bonus, especially for teachers with the most challenging assignments.

Conclusion

This white paper provides partner-district leaders with information pertinent to the study from the perspectives of school and district leaders regarding SPED teacher recruiting and retention difficulties after the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides seven recommendations to decrease the number of SPED vacancies over time. The problem addressed by the study was the large number of vacancies the district has seen in SPED post-pandemic and the inability of personnel to meet IEP compliance requirements. The study used a basic qualitative design and collected data through semistructured interviews with 13 district leaders, 10 principals, and three district-level leaders. Data analysis revealed four themes: (1) Training and supporting SPED teachers and staff are vital for their retention; (2) work-related stressors increase the likelihood of SPED teacher attrition; (3) extreme student behavior and diverse needs make SPED environments overwhelming for SPED teachers and staff; and (4) post-pandemic scarcity of SPED-certified applicants is hindering the recruitment of SPED teachers. As a result of the study findings and related literature, the following practices are recommended to the partner district: (1) Provide SPED teachers with ongoing training and support on SPED classroom management strategies and managing work-related stressors; (2) provide PD and support opportunities for principals on recognizing and valuing diversity in teacher recruiting; (3) explore ways to limit the burden of SPED related compliance reporting for case managers and limit additions to established SPED unit caps; and (4) explore ways to increase compensation or provide incentives for staff serving in hard-to-fill assignments. The district could be better positioned to lower the current numbers of SPED vacancies

by adopting and implementing these recommendations which in turn would help schools improve their level of compliance with IDEA requirements.

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White Paper Questions//Concerns/Clarification Form

Please complete the form if you have any questions, concerns, or need clarification related to the study or the contents of the white paper

What questions, concerns, or clarification is needed after reading the white paper?

Send via work email or school mail. I will respond within 48 hours of your inquiry.

Thank you,

Framy Diaz

Survey for White Paper Recipients

Study: School Leaders' Perceptions of Post-COVID-19 Recruiting and Retention of Special Education Teachers in a Local School District

Researcher: Framy Diaz / Walden University

1. The information in the white paper is well organized.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

2. The white paper gives the reader clear and concise information about the study.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

3. The white paper provides leaders with clear and practical recommendations.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

4. The study was relevant to today's challenges.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

5. The recommendations could potentially affect positive change.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

6. I will likely share/utilize the insights I learned from reading this white paper.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

7. White paper recommendations should be considered or adopted.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Welcome participant – Good morning/afternoon! Thank you for consenting to participate in this interview and study.

- State Purpose: Gain the perspectives….

As a reminder, your identity during the process will be safeguarded and remain confidential.

- Explain risks associated with participating in the study.
- The interview will consist of 7 – 8 questions. Please provide as much information as you can and feel free to elaborate. If I need clarification or need a bit more information, I may ask to follow up questions in between.
- At this time, I will start audio recording, and we will begin the interview:

This is participant #____.

1. What special education units do you have in your campus or support as district leader?
2. What would you say have been obstacles in the recruitment of special education teachers after the pandemic in the district, if any?
3. What would you say have been obstacles in the retention of special education teachers after the pandemic in the district, if any?
4. What areas of special education do you consider have been the most challenging to recruit or retain teachers for in the district? Why do you think these areas have been the most challenging?
5. Regarding the recruitment and retention of special education teachers, have you noticed a difference between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic years? What would you say are the biggest differences?

6. What unconventional methods or alternative strategies have you implemented or supported (district level), if any, to ensure you have adequate coverage for your available special education positions?
7. What support or changes do you believe could help facilitate the recruitment and retention of special education teachers in the district?
8. Are there any recommendations you have for other campus or district level leaders regarding how they can better manage the difficulties related to recruiting and retaining special education teachers?