

## Administrator Influence on the Retention of Special Education Teachers: A Review Synthesis

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*This review examined literature on special education (SPED) specific to the persistence and career intentions of teachers serving students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBDs). The research question guiding this analysis was, What factors influence SPED teachers' intentions to continue teaching or leave their job? Peer-reviewed research from 2000 to 2025 was analyzed, resulting in 79 fully reviewed sources. House's (1981) social support theory of managerial support was adapted for the review. We highlight administrator support, working conditions, and education policies as three contextual factors of social support that influence SPED teacher retention. Importantly, the interplay of these factors affects teacher persistence and career intentions. Administrator support was identified as a significant contributor to retaining SPED educators, as well as other factors such as teacher team efficacy. Understanding what affects SPED teacher retention, particularly those educating EBD populations, is critical to the field and its sustainability. Principals' implementation of recommended strategies may reduce teacher attrition and, in turn, improve student outcomes. To create a more stable and effective workforce in SPED that addresses root causes of attrition, comprehensive approaches to policymaking are necessary.*

**Keywords:** administrator support; collegial support; emotional and behavioral disabilities; retention, special education teacher

Globally, teacher attrition is a significant crisis, with nearly half of all novices resigning by their fifth year (Shuls & Flores, 2020). Contemporary data indicate that nearly 50% of special education (SPED) teachers leave within 5 years (Kelly et al., 2023), whereas early data recorded 25% attrition in the first 3 years (Billingsley, 2004), suggesting that turnover has doubled for this group. Special educators differ from other categories of educators. The most recent estimate for the national K–12 public school teacher attrition rate is 7% for the 2023–2024 school year (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2025). The trend in SPED teacher shortages is apparent among those educating emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBDs) populations (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020), which establishes a strong need for the present study. An undersupply of SPED teachers prepared to serve EBD groups has been reported by many school districts (Albrecht et al., 2009). Attrition perpetuates staffing challenges, increases hiring and training costs, reduces student support, and diminishes instructional quality (Bettini et al., 2019; Podolsky et al., 2019). These systemic issues impede efforts to establish learning environments that are both stable and effective (Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

The purpose of this review was to examine literature on SPED specific to the persistence and career intentions of teachers serving EBD populations. To guide our analysis, we asked, What factors influence SPED teachers' intentions to continue teaching or leave their job? While SPED teacher attrition has been extensively studied, less attention has been paid to intentions and concerns. To better understand key influences on SPED teacher intentions, we consider factors perceived as integral to retention in the current climate (Parnes et al., 2025). As an educational leadership professor and secondary SPED assistant principal, given the gravity of administrator support, we seek to elucidate complexities of educational leadership tied directly to SPED issues. *Emotional disturbance*, germane here, is defined by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (2004) as a disability (learning difficulties, immaturity, withdrawal, aggression, hyperactivity) that affects behavior and performance.

### Search Process and Criteria

Peer-reviewed studies from 2000 to 2025 were analyzed, and a social support theory from 1981 was adapted. Relevant and contemporary sources were located via university library databases (EBSCOhost, etc.) and Google Scholar. Search terms *administrative support*, *retention*, and *SPED teacher* yielded over 2,000 sources. *Behavior*, *disability*, *policy*, *stress*, and *turnover intention* produced 186 hits. Codes (SPED-T = special education teacher, etc.) emerged from the research question, search terms, and literature results. Coding processes followed qualitative procedures. Sources were searched for search terms. Frequency counts and contextual meanings were documented, particularly for reviews of research (e.g., Brunsting et al., 2023). Fully reviewed were 79 sources addressing influences on SPED teachers. Regarding limitations of this review, the focus was mainly on US-based studies, which excluded some international perspectives, and the coverage of research methods was not thorough.

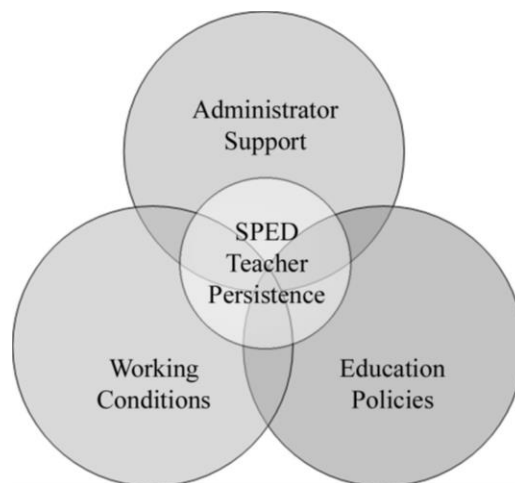
## Conceptual Framework

Shaping this analysis is House's (1981) social support theory, which defines social support as the perception of being cared for, having assistance available, and being part of a supportive network (as described by Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2014). The framework categorizes support into four distinct types of managerial support of teachers. *Appraisal/esteem support* involves feedback on performance and validation; *emotional support* encompasses empathy, understanding, care, and love; *informational support* entails sharing advice, guidance, information, and knowledge; and *instrumental/tangible support* manifests as material aid, services, resources, and assistance.

Grounded in House's theory, Muñoz-Laboy et al.'s (2014) study of incarcerated Latino males built upon studies of social support. In general, these have postulated an association between social support that is provided and perceived by recipients, and query which supports may have more impact on lives. Many studies in psychology, social work, and health professions have applied social support theory along these lines (e.g., Gutiérrez-Sánchez et al., 2024; Melrose et al., 2015; Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2014). About the utility of social support theory, these researchers have suggested that the types of support, whether actual or perceived, are believed to buffer stress and positively impact people's mental and physical wellbeing. A recommendation from Muñoz-Laboy et al. (2014) was to expand the informational support provided to Latino males through environmental interventions that mobilize emotional and familial relationships. Through quantitative analysis, Melrose et al. (2015) established that the health and wellbeing support an individual receives may not even be needed, thus supports must align with wants.

It can be inferred, then, that received support refers to specific actions or resources (e.g., advice or help with a task) that have been provided. Needed support is the type of

**Figure 1**  
*Factors Influencing SPED Teacher Persistence*



assistance that a person requires or is lacking in a particular situation based on specific challenges. Mismatches between needed and received support can aggravate dissatisfaction or distress for recipients.

Adapting House's theory and introducing it to the educational leadership field, we highlight administrator support, working conditions, and education policies. We approach these as three contextual factors of social support that influence SPED teacher retention, persistence, and intentions (Scott et al., 2021). (See Figure 1.) In our conceptualization of these support factors, we attend to instrumental, informational, emotional, and appraisal support.

### **Administrator Support**

Administrator investment in the SPED workforce necessitates emotional labor, feedback, resources, professional development, mentoring/induction, collegial collaboration, staff cooperation, and strategic role structuring (Albrecht et al., 2009; Bettini et al., 2020; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Conley & You, 2017; García & Weiss, 2020; Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). Emotional labor (e.g., caring behavior) is more invisible yet fundamental to the rhythm of principals' work. A 2022 UK-based survey (n = 6057 principals and teachers) found that 1 out of 3 leaders was considering quitting for workload and health reasons (Thomson & Greany, 2024).

A survey (2007–2008) with a national sample of SPED secondary teachers (n = 2060) from the US found that both “administrative support” and “teacher team efficacy” had significantly influenced their intention to leave (Conley & You, 2016, p. 521). Teachers of EBD groups especially benefit from administrator and collegial encouragement, assistance, and guidance within healthy work environments, which informs their career plans (Prather-Jones, 2011). Novice teachers have reported job satisfaction when they see their school's leadership as helpful and caseload as reasonable (Scott et al., 2021).

In fact, strong administrative support is recognized as a leading factor in teacher retention (Albrecht et al., 2009; Bettini et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2014; Conley & You, 2017; Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). A 2019 survey from the Virginia Department of Education (2019) indicated that the likelihood of SPED teachers vacating their positions is higher when they feel inadequately supported by administration and colleagues in the delivery of SPED services. Studies from different countries indicate that leader attitudes and behaviors carry weight in SPED educators' career decisions. While SPED teachers (n = 343) in Saudi Arabia rated all support domains denoting work conditions as important on Aldosiry's (2022) survey, they underscored the value of emotional support from administrators. Appraisal support was ranked next in importance, followed by instrumental and informational support. To reduce stress levels and raise job satisfaction, leaders are urged to intensify supports for early career teachers.

Emotional support fosters connection through compassion and concern for workplace wellbeing (Cancio, 2014). Administrators who prioritize communication, express gratitude, demonstrate pedagogical interest, and solicit feedback show respect for teachers. Feeling valued corresponds with the perception that administration is emotionally supportive (Cancio, 2014). Instrumental support, which involves facilitating educators' efforts to meet professional

demands, is characterized by administrator assistance with teacher tasks (Brunsting et al., 2023). Ensuring adequate planning time, providing necessary materials, and easing challenging student behavior and parent interactions are other leadership responsibilities (Cancio et al., 2014).

A statistically significant correlation between teachers who reported high levels of administrative support and their intention to stay has been established, with SPED educators stating that they intend to continue teaching (Aldosiry, 2022). Teachers who indicate strong commitment to their position believe that they have benefited from administrative, appraisal, emotional, instrumental, and informational support (House, 1981). Administrators' appraisal support demonstrates confidence in professionalism, which involves trusting teachers and their abilities, and providing guidance and feedback to enhance skills and effectiveness (Brunsting et al., 2023). Making expectations clear around responsibilities also qualifies as appraisal support (Cancio et al., 2014). Informational support occurs when teachers have opportunities to improve their instruction and performance through, for example, quality feedback (Cancio et al., 2014).

From a national principal sample ( $n = 3,299$ ), 55% reported that they felt unprepared to support students with high-incidence disabilities (Johnston & Young, 2019). Even though administration impacts teachers in multiple ways, only 26% of SPED teachers considered their principals prepared to support them (Fowler et al., 2019). Thus, many teachers see their administrators as unable to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities (SWD) and those teaching them. Besides providing quality instruction, special educators are responsible for addressing student needs, managing caseloads, completing paperwork, and conducting assessments (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). Despite relying on different stakeholders to help serve the needs of SWD, they depend mostly on administrators, whom they believe have the greatest influence on their job persistence and success (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Administrative support is pivotal to shaping working conditions and, in accordance with numerous studies, has more impact than any other factor (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023) or is on par with team collaboration and effectiveness (Conley & You, 2016). Principals' actions directly impact teachers and have indirect influence through hiring decisions, resource allocation, communication methods, support provided during challenging situations, involvement of staff in schoolwide decision-making, and mentoring/induction (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023).

### **Working Conditions**

Working conditions encompass workplace culture, job demands, and workload manageability (Billingsley et al., 2020; Brunsting et al., 2023). Job situations have also been described as responsibilities of teaching, along with organizational and social capital that support meeting these obligations (Bettini et al., 2019). Educators' assessments of whether they can effectively fulfill their duties given constraints and physical elements like work hours are additional aspects (Cummings et al., 2021). Large caseloads were found to be a weighty factor in SPED teachers' decisions to leave (this was the main issue for 33% of those exiting; Billingsley, 2007). In Fowler's (2019) research, 79% of teachers stated having insufficient/no time to plan and

collaborate with others. Another longstanding factor was paperwork, with SPED teachers spending 5 hours weekly on this task (more time than general educators) (Albrecht et al., 2009).

Drawing attention to the need for administrative support in managing SPED workloads, 31% of elementary and secondary EBD groups received instruction in a self-contained setting for over 60% of the day (Cummings et al., 2021). Specialists' planning time must be protected and their resources adequate to satisfy complex student needs, Cummings et al. argued. Districts should monitor special educators' working conditions to ensure that intensive support is available and the job is not overtaxing (Cancio et al., 2018). EBD populations' unique challenges require well-prepared, supported, and stable educators (Cancio et al., 2014); however, many teachers in SPED settings are simply not equipped to meet these complex needs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The chronic stress of serving EBD groups is worse than teaching other SWD (O'Brien et al., 2019), intensifying departures (Bettini et al., 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). On a hopeful note, SPED teachers who viewed their workload as manageable were more likely to remain (Albrecht et al., 2009; Cancio et al., 2018). Moreover, EBD educators who taught multiple students with similar profiles tended to view their workload as tolerable (Cummings et al., 2021).

### **Collegial Support, Mentoring, and Induction**

The quality of collegial relationships also affects job satisfaction for teachers (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). Social resources, including a supportive and collaborative school culture, impact educators' intent to stay (Bettini et al., 2019). Teacher trust and collaboration matter to satisfaction, instructional quality, and a sense of collective efficacy (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). Conley and You (2017) confirmed a significant relationship between collegial support and job satisfaction and commitment. Strong teacher cooperation has been linked to a lower probability of changing schools (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). But, Bettini et al. (2019) found that SPED teachers' perceptions of culture were not associated with any specific outcome of retention.

With reference to Mullen (2025), school districts are required to provide mentoring to new teachers, which supports retention and job satisfaction. Strong induction programs have mentor–mentee collaboration, such as classroom observations, mentor training, and incentives (e.g., release time for planning). To ensure mentoring effectiveness, districtwide and school induction programs have the proactive support of invested leaders, an experienced mentor in the novice teacher's subject or specialty, and dedicated time for planning and collaboration.

#### **Safety Concerns**

A gap in research on teacher attrition is apparent for safety issues, but safety is a critical aspect of working conditions (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023), especially for EBD educators (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley, 2004). Frequent challenging behavior is a concern in environments with social, emotional, and mental health needs (Wagner, 2014). Besides widespread teaching barriers (e.g., students not prepared to learn), threats to safety disrupt teacher wellbeing and increase stress. National survey data (2015–2016) indicated that 21.8% of teachers felt intimidated at their school and 12.4% had been assaulted by a student (García & Weiss, 2020).

As EBD numbers increase, the likelihood is that educators will leave teaching (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). When teachers reported student problems (perhaps related to safety concerns), they were slightly less inclined to say they planned to keep teaching (Bettini et al., 2021). Challenging situations arise, such as potential restraint use and injury from students (Albrecht et al., 2009); however, these researchers found no significant correlation between experiencing student-inflicted injuries or the frequency of restraint use and teacher intentions to leave. To be taught, these students must feel welcomed, safe, loved, and supported—EBD teachers have also indicated that knowledge of emotional and disruptive behavior, contracts and routines, and safe and caring settings can lead to productive learning (Mullen & Hunt, 2022).

### Teacher Preparation

In Virginia's special educator workforce, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC, 2020) noted a significant gap. A 10% turnover rate (conservative estimate) revealed that 1,500 SPED teaching positions needed to be filled in the state for the 2019–2020 academic year. However, in 2019 this state produced only 303 graduates with SPED teaching credentials, which forced districts to hire provisionally licensed or substitute teachers.

Quality teacher preparation, including clinical experiences and mentoring, can improve employee retention (Sutcher et al., 2019). According to Darling-Hammond (2000), teachers who felt well prepared in their subject matter and teaching methods were more likely to feel satisfied and stay. In addition, SPED teachers with over 10 weeks of student teaching in their preparation program had a higher 1-year retention rate (almost 80%) (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Fully certified teachers had a higher probability of remaining in the classroom (Billingsley, 2004), and commitment, satisfaction, and effectiveness increased over time (Aldosiry, 2022). However, novice special educators face overwhelming work-related challenges, making them highly susceptible to stress and attrition. Teacher preparation is vital for producing SPED teachers who will become effective, enjoy their job, and stay in the profession (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

To examine essential skills for novice EBD educators, Kindzierski (2013) surveyed teachers. Appropriate preparation (23.5%), management skills (22.5%), and disposition for working with disabilities (17.8%) were significant. As 70% of respondents noted, effective teaching strategies can deescalate behavior problems. A majority (65%) who had been teaching for under 5 years expressed the need for further training on literacy instruction. Over half felt dissatisfied with their preparation programs, which other studies have confirmed (e.g., Manning et al., 2009). This teacher feedback is consistent with other study findings—EBD educators who are afforded comprehensive training and support are more inclined to remain teaching (Kindzierski, 2013).

### Stress and Burnout

Burnout is a primary reason for teacher attrition. The magnification in challenging behaviors and needs has exhausted EBD teachers (Gilmour et al., 2022). Stress is a direct response to a specific stressor, whereas burnout results from prolonged stress in overcommitting situations

(Cancio et al., 2018). Heightened or persistent stress leads to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of inadequacy (Hester et al., 2020).

Job demands and resources must be balanced, and when this occurs employees can more effectively manage their workloads (Bettini et al., 2019). However, demands that are not met with resources can produce overwhelm, stress, and fatigue, resulting in attrition. Through emotional exhaustion, stress was shown to indirectly affect intent. Aldosiry (2022) added that SPED teachers associate high-stress ratings with large caseloads, excessive paperwork, student behavior, and meetings. Kindzierski's (2013) research provides support for Singh and Billingsley's (1996) assertion that EBD educators have higher stress and lower satisfaction and efficacy than their colleagues. Teaching students with multiple disabilities may further elevate stress and feelings of ineptitude (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

#### Coping and Pedagogical Strategies

Working conditions specific to instructional and logistical factors, and support and resources, can help with stress and burnout (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019) from "excessive workload," "required paperwork," "data collection and documentation," and "inadequate time to plan" (Kindzierski, 2013, p. 101). As per Cancio et al. (2018), teachers' coping strategies mainly involve support from others and relaxation after school. Lowest-rated coping strategies included oversleeping and substance use. As suggested, teachers can benefit from professional development on coping strategies; administrators have been advised to implement measures that lower SPED teacher stress (e.g., reduce workload demands; Mathews, 2022).

Mullen and Hunt (2022) identified 40 evidence-based strategies from research on affirming classroom cultures for SWD. Their analysis was also specific to students with EBDs and pedagogical strategies used to improve schooling experiences in ways that cultivate child development socially (e.g., relationship building), academically (e.g., classroom structure), and behaviorally (e.g., calming areas). Interviews with nine EBD teachers during the pandemic surfaced a major concern. Finding online learning systems taxing, they wanted to return to the physical classroom. Across classrooms, a total of 13 strategies were in use. "Building relationships" and "creating a positive learning environment/healthy culture" were particularly impactful, accounting for all three educational domains (social, academic, and behavior, p. 465).

#### Compensation

Competitive compensation is essential (García & Weiss, 2020; Podolsky et al., 2017). Salary and benefits have consistently been cited as a reason for leaving (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). SPED teachers' salary is often higher than general educators', yet SPED attrition is greater (Zhang et al., 2020). This suggests that other factors are at play, perhaps inadequate administrative support and teacher teaming (Conley & You, 2016).

#### Education Policies

Education policies stipulate salaries/benefits and regulate teacher credentialing and licensing and preservice preparation for EBD teacher workforces (Scott et al., 2020). To address staffing problems, Connecticut implemented a multifaceted approach that raised salaries to

attract highly qualified teachers, and its equalization aid encouraged districts to voluntarily increase salaries. This initiative helped less affluent districts retain skilled teachers while competing for qualified candidates (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Podolsky et al., 2017; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). States and districts offer financial incentives (retention bonuses, housing, down payment support) to attract and keep educators; when paired with competitive salaries, loan forgiveness programs have also improved recruitment and retention (JLARC, 2020). To retain teachers, financial incentives must be sufficient (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Systemic teacher shortages have been met with new policy frameworks and actionable strategies. Among them, García and Weiss's (2020) policy agenda—which recognizes multiple factors as interrelated—presents a comprehensive approach to elevating teaching to the status of other college-educated professions. They recommended increasing pay to attract and keep educators, and nurturing teacher voice and learning communities. The latter proposal aligns directly with schools' local control. SPED teacher understaffing is acute, particularly in high-poverty, hard-to-staff, and rural US public schools. Acknowledging this fact, García and Weiss confirmed that “[large numbers of] teachers who quit worked in less cooperative environments [wherein] they did not get strong support or encouragement from the administration” (p. 8).

## Discussion

Based on the present review, administrator support, collegial relationships, working conditions, stress management, teacher preparation, stress and burnout, and compensation are all key factors in the career intentions of special educators, including those who teach EBD groups. Principal encouragement and guidance—emotional support in addition to appraisal, informational, and instrumental support in House's framework—were frequently seen as having a strong influence on SPED teachers' intentions to stay. One can likely assume, then, that administrator support constitutes a primary contributing factor in special educator retention.

EBD populations present complex and intense educational challenges that require specialized intervention (Cancio et al., 2014). These students often exhibit aggressive behaviors (Aldosiry, 2022), and their teachers may find it difficult to manage the multifaceted responsibilities of their position (Cancio et al., 2014). Students with chronic behavioral challenges are at significant risk for unemployment and other poor long-term outcomes (e.g., justice system involvement) (Cummings et al., 2021; Wagner, 2014). Losing SPED teachers perpetuates inconsistency, instability, and diminished educational quality for students, affecting school culture (Hanushek et al., 2016). Schools with high teacher turnover often struggle with standardized test scores, behavioral disruptions, and student engagement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

Thus, in the SPED field, teacher attrition has a profound impact. SPED educators' specialized skills (differentiated instruction, classroom management strategies, relationship-building with students and parents, etc.) develop through experience and professional learning (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). EBD groups present unique challenges that teachers meet with successful strategies (Mullen & Hunt, 2022). But, compounding difficulties—high caseloads, limited administrator support, excessive paperwork, and emotionally demanding student

interactions—contribute to dissatisfaction, burnout, and attrition (Bettini et al., 2017; Sutton et al., 2022).

Caseload and paperwork overloads call for intervention. Administrations can uniquely provide the instrumental/tangible support needed to effect change through assistance, services, resources, mentoring/induction and other means. Poor administrator support justifies providing emotional support to SPED teachers in accordance with their individual needs. Improving communication, showing empathy, and asking what matters to the teacher are advisable, as is being mindful about appraisal/esteem, informal, and instrumental support. Difficult student relations call for comprehensive supports on behalf of EBD and all SPED teachers, including emotional support for their emotional labor. Ensuring that the supports provided or facilitated by administrators are actually needed by an individual teacher/team facing particular challenges bridges the receive–perceive support gap. Received support that responds to SPED teacher needs can lead to better outcomes, such as enhanced wellbeing, reduced stress, and plans to remain.

Consequently, SPED ranks as one of the hardest areas of teaching, and many positions remain vacant or filled with underqualified personnel (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Instability in SPED classrooms hinders progress, as students require consistent instructional approaches and strong relationships to thrive (Brunsting et al., 2021; Mullen & Hunt, 2022). Recruiting, hiring, and training teachers is expensive (Podolsky et al., 2019). High turnover strains school budgets, diverting resources from instruction and professional development initiatives. Constant staff turnover can undermine a school’s morale, exacerbating the retention crisis (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Reasons for teacher attrition are multifaceted and interconnected, contextually dependent, and not fully understood. Nonetheless, inadequate administrator support is one of the most frequently cited factors influencing educators’ decisions to leave (Bettini et al., 2017). Those feeling unsupported by their principals are vulnerable to job dissatisfaction and burnout (Conley & You, 2017), perhaps having experienced a lack of appraisal, emotional, informational, and/or instructional support. Conversely, schools that foster a strong sense of community, provide quality induction for novice teachers, and offer desired learning options tend to have better staff retention (Podolsky et al., 2019). Excessive workloads, unrealistic performance expectations, and lack of autonomy in decision-making trigger thoughts about leaving (García & Weiss, 2020; Sutton et al., 2022). SPED teachers must navigate complex Individualized Education Program (IEP) requirements while advocating for SWD and their families and managing high-stress classrooms (Brunsting et al., 2021). Without sufficient resources, collaboration time, and mental health support, many struggle to meet the demands of their roles—exhausted, they may resign (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

### **Implications for Practice and Preparation**

Higher salaries, loan forgiveness programs, and enhanced professional development are among the interventions that policymakers and education stakeholders use to address the teacher retention crisis (Sutcher et al., 2016). However, financial incentives alone are insufficient to retain teachers long-term (Podolsky et al., 2019). A comprehensive approach to workforce

stability in SPED addresses root causes of attrition: overwhelming workloads, complex needs (like IEPs), insufficient administrative support and resources, stress and burnout, low salary relative to the demands, and large class sizes. Such an approach improves school culture, cultivates teacher development, and reduces administrative burdens. Knowing what drives SPED teacher retention and satisfaction can shape impactful leadership practices and policies.

Factors identified as critical to teacher retention were elucidated here, including supportive leadership, healthy collegial cultures, financial considerations, streamlined paperwork, professional development opportunities, working conditions, and teacher autonomy. As policy actors, principals should attend to teacher influence and belonging. This approach to policy via García and Weiss (2020) suggests that while compensation is essential, sustainable solutions to teacher shortages require a multipronged strategy. Beneficiaries must include schools with high concentrations of students of color and in poverty and rural areas.

In fact, to meaningfully tackle SPED teacher shortages, stakeholders have been urged to develop a comprehensive plan for educators' supply, preparation, and retention (CEEDAR Center, 2020; García & Weiss, 2020). Recommended strategies include strengthening preparation, improving hiring, increasing compensation, supporting new teachers, and enhancing working conditions (Podolsky et al., 2017). While reducing entry requirements and creating fast tracks may alleviate shortages, such moves are not viable in the long term. Underprepared and ineffective educators are more likely to quit, negatively impacting student outcomes (CEEDAR Center, 2020).

Principal knowledge of SPED is limited, and many have not fully engaged in this field of practice. Confirmatory research includes a survey of 134 principals in a US state (Sun & Xin, 2019). University principal preparation programs have been called upon to provide SPED content in courses and for administrative and supervision licensure so principals have the skills for to make decisions and provide services to support SWD (Sun & Xin). Besides evaluating SPED teachers, principals are responsible for ensuring that IEPs are implemented for students with an eligible disability, which is why they need to understand legal, pedagogical, and procedural aspects of SPED (Sun & Xin, 2019). Effective leadership development through principal preparation programs, professional organizations, and district-led principal professional development opportunities further shape schoolwide support for SPED teachers and EBD populations. House's theory can be utilized to promote understanding of the four framework elements and ways to apply them in real-world settings. Aspiring principals can be engaged in role plays that, for example, animate all four types of support and skills building in each area, perhaps especially emotional support of SPED teachers (e.g., empathy). University leadership programs are equipped to educate principals about their own role in supporting SPED teachers by being knowledgeable about crucial SPED issues, effective as communicators, and adept at facilitating targeted mentorship and professional development opportunities. Good work is also aimed at fostering inclusive school cultures, implementing supportive policies and programs, creating collaborative environments, equitably distributing resources, and implementing research-based practices in SPED teaching. Policy interventions must benefit working conditions for SPED educators and enhance support structures (Gates et al., 2019; Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023).

Attracting SPED teachers to principal preparation programs and providing pathways for their transition into leadership roles could strengthen school administration and the SPED field overall. Special educator skills translate well to principal positions. Their deep understanding of diverse student needs and inclusive learning environments—as well as experience with student and family advocacy, IEPs, and resource management in SPED—provides a foundation for school leadership and work culture (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

### **Future Research Recommendations**

A systemic, research-informed approach has been called upon to complement short-term remedies and address financial incentives, preparation and support, and working conditions (CEEDAR Center, 2020; García & Weiss, 2020). Research has firmly established that working conditions affect teachers' instructional efficacy and student achievement. As recognized, strong leadership is critical for constructing positive work environments and successfully supporting teachers, which, importantly, directly affects SPED educator career intentions.

The escalation in work stress combined with understaffing of special educators make attracting SPED teachers and retaining them an imperative. Desirable working conditions favor intentional, supportive leadership; collaborative culture; work–life balance; and self-care (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). To improve administrator and collegial supports and leader/teacher preparation, measurable indicators must be specified, backed with clear, actionable practices. Future studies ought to identify ways to focus on these directions for the most impact on teacher retention and student outcomes in the current climate. In the US, this is characterized by widespread teacher dissatisfaction, driven by teacher shortages, declining working conditions, political interference in curriculum, and underfunding of public schools (Parnes et al., 2025).

### **Concluding Points**

In this article, SPED teacher persistence was considered in relation to administrator support, working conditions, and education policies. The interplay of these factors was shown to affect persistence and career intentions, in particular teachers of EBD populations. We presented leadership support and other contextual factors through the lens of House's (1981) theory of social support and contemporary research. Inescapably, as found from our review synthesis, administrator support is crucial for SPED teacher persistence, satisfaction, and effectiveness. School practices, cultures, and policies are vital support systems for special educators, and SPED workforce sustainability is essential for EBD groups. SPED teacher retention, a societal and systemic issue, is an urgent concern for anyone with a stake in education.

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