



Strengthening the Special Education Workforce

A Data-Informed Feasibility Study of Recruitment, Retention, and Staffing Solutions Across the West Central Region of New Hampshire

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Improving educational outcomes for children with disabilities

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Executive Summary

West Central school districts continue to face persistent challenges in recruiting, retaining, and sustaining a qualified special education workforce. These challenges affect both certified professionals and paraprofessionals and have direct implications for service continuity, workload sustainability, compliance timelines, and student outcomes. The findings summarized below are intended to guide action, supporting district leaders in decisions related to recruitment, retention, staffing models, and equitable access for students with disabilities.

This workforce study was initiated by the West Central Special Education Administrators (WCSEA) in partnership with participating districts and funded by CMF Kids, whose mission is to improve educational outcomes for children with disabilities. It was designed to generate actionable, data-informed insights that support district decision-making and strengthen inclusive special education workforce systems across the West Central region. The analysis draws on a regional workforce survey, district-submitted staffing and vacancy data, and targeted interviews with district leaders and state partners.

Statewide Context

While this study focuses on the West Central region, its findings reflect workforce challenges common across New Hampshire, particularly in rural and remote communities. State-level data on special education staffing are limited; New Hampshire does not routinely publish statewide counts of special education vacancies or attrition. However, the New Hampshire Department of Education identifies Special Education Teacher and Early Childhood Special Education (N-3) as ongoing critical shortage areas. At the same time, NHED reports that workforce pressures are driven more by recruitment and retention challenges related to geography, compensation, housing availability, workload, and professional support than by licensure supply. This context underscores the urgency of locally grounded, district-verified analyses to inform effective workforce solutions.

Across districts, findings show that recruitment challenges are driven primarily by limited applicant pools, certification and endorsement requirements, geographic distance, housing availability, and competition with neighboring districts and contracted service providers. Retention risks are closely tied to workload sustainability, staffing instability, compensation pressures, particularly for paraprofessionals, and uneven access to professional support and mentoring.

Notably, while many staff report a short-term intent to remain in their current roles, districts continue to experience staffing turnover, resulting in recurring vacancies, reliance on contracted services, and uneven workload distribution. Several districts have implemented promising local strategies to address these challenges, but these efforts remain informal and are not consistently shared across the region. Together, these findings are intended not only to describe current workforce conditions but also to guide district leaders in decisions related to recruitment strategies, retention supports, staffing models, and equitable access for students with disabilities.

This report concludes with six actionable recommendations to strengthen regional recruitment pipelines, improve workforce sustainability, and support coordinated planning while respecting district differences in size, capacity, and context.

Key Takeaway

Recruitment and retention challenges are not isolated to individual roles or districts. Persistent vacancies, reliance on contracted services, and uneven workload distribution affect service continuity and long-term workforce sustainability across the region.

Purpose and Study Overview

The purpose of the West Central (WC) Special Education Workforce Study is to provide districts with clear, usable information to support workforce planning, decision-making, and regional collaboration. The study is descriptive and intended to inform action rather than evaluate individual district performance.

Specifically, the study aims to:

- Establish a shared factual baseline on special education staffing conditions across WC.
- Identify key pressures affecting recruitment, retention, and workload sustainability.
- Surface contextual factors that shape workforce challenges across districts.
- Highlight practices that may support replication or coordinated regional strategies.

The study examines workforce conditions across the full continuum of special education staffing, including special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers. While New Hampshire regulatory frameworks inform the study, it does not evaluate district compliance or make fiscal determinations.

Methods and Data Sources

This study uses a mixed-methods, descriptive design to capture both quantitative trends and contextual insights. Data sources include:

Regional Workforce Survey:

A structured, anonymous survey distributed across West Central districts to collect information on roles, recruitment pathways, workload perceptions, professional support, compensation factors, and short-term retention outlook.

District-Submitted Staffing Data:

Participating districts provided staffing counts, vacancy information, and contextual indicators to support the interpretation of survey results.

Key-Informant Input:

Targeted interviews with district leaders and state partners provided additional context on licensure pathways, staffing structures, and implementation realities.

Publicly Available Data:

State-level education indicators were used to contextualize district-reported data. Data were analyzed descriptively and reported in aggregate to protect confidentiality.

Recruitment Findings

Recruitment challenges are widespread across all participating districts, with the most significant difficulty reported in special education teaching roles, paraprofessional positions, and specialized related services. Districts consistently cite limited applicant pools as the primary constraint.

Contributing factors include geographic isolation, distance from educator preparation programs, certification and endorsement requirements, and competition with neighboring districts and contracted service providers. Several districts noted that even when positions are posted for extended periods, applicant pools remain small or nonexistent.

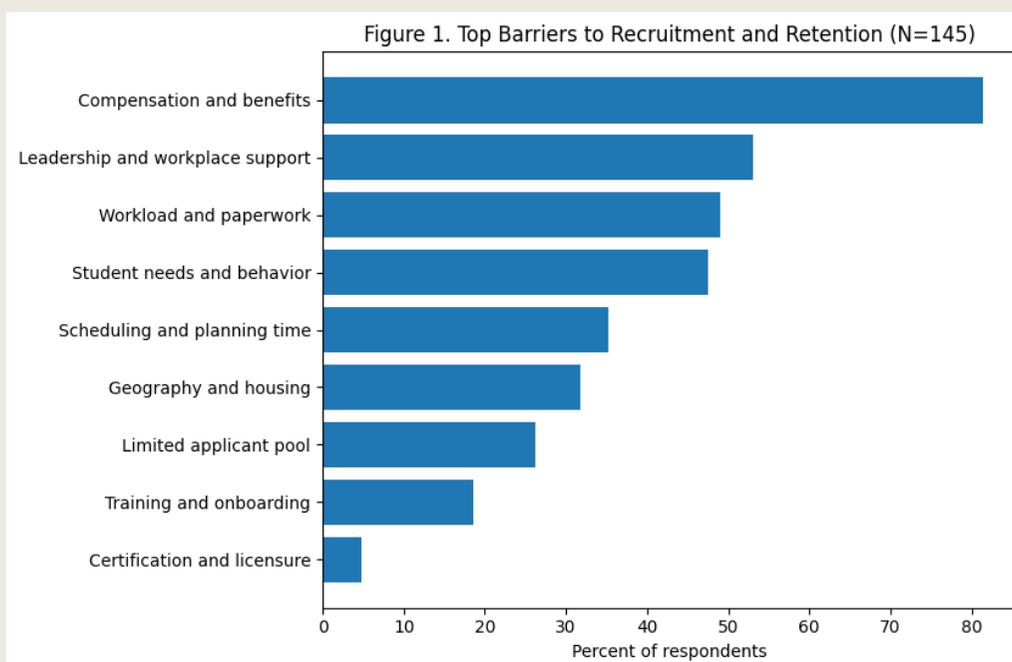
Districts rely heavily on informal recruitment strategies, such as word of mouth, internal referrals, and short-term coverage arrangements. Formal, coordinated regional recruitment strategies are limited, particularly for hard-to-fill special education roles.

Recruitment Insight

Most districts rely heavily on informal recruitment pathways, including word-of-mouth and internal referrals, while coordinated regional recruitment strategies remain limited, especially for specialized and hard-to fill roles.

Findings highlight opportunities for districts to examine where recruitment relies most heavily on informal pathways and where more coordinated or regional approaches may help expand candidate reach.

Figure 1. Recruitment Barriers



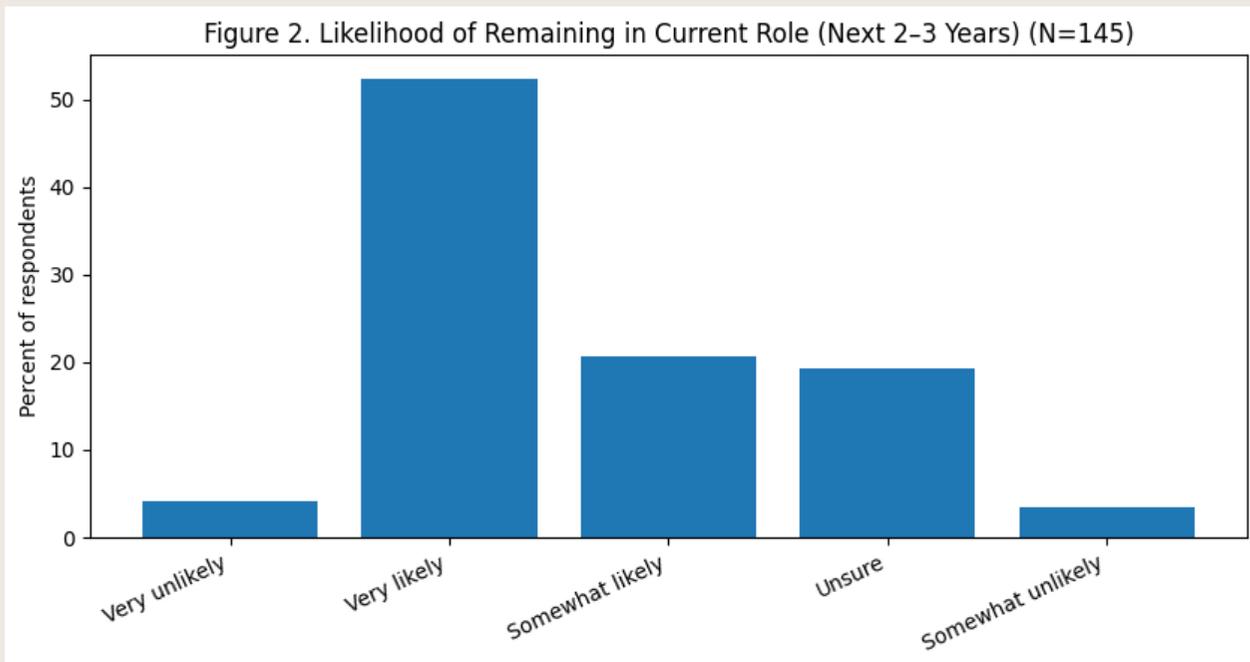
Retention Findings

Survey responses indicate that many staff intend to remain in their current roles in the short term. However, this stability coexists with persistent retention risks that contribute to ongoing staffing instability.

Retention is most strongly influenced by workload sustainability, leadership support, role clarity, compensation, and access to professional growth opportunities. Paraprofessional positions were identified as particularly vulnerable due to wage competitiveness and limited advancement opportunities. District leaders described patterns in which vacancies are filled by staff moving between districts, resulting in temporary stabilization for one district while perpetuating shortages across the region.

Districts can use these findings to assess which retention pressures, particularly workload sustainability, compensation competitiveness, and access to professional support, are most likely to affect long-term workforce stability.

Figure 2. Likelihood of Remaining in Role (2–3 Years)



Workload and Caseload Findings

Caseload size varies across districts based on enrollment, service delivery models, and staffing levels. However, caseload numbers alone do not fully capture the workload demands staff face.

Staff identified paperwork, IEP meetings, documentation requirements, case management responsibilities, travel between buildings, and coverage during vacancies as significant contributors to workload strain. The lack of protected planning time was cited as a key factor affecting job satisfaction and sustainability.

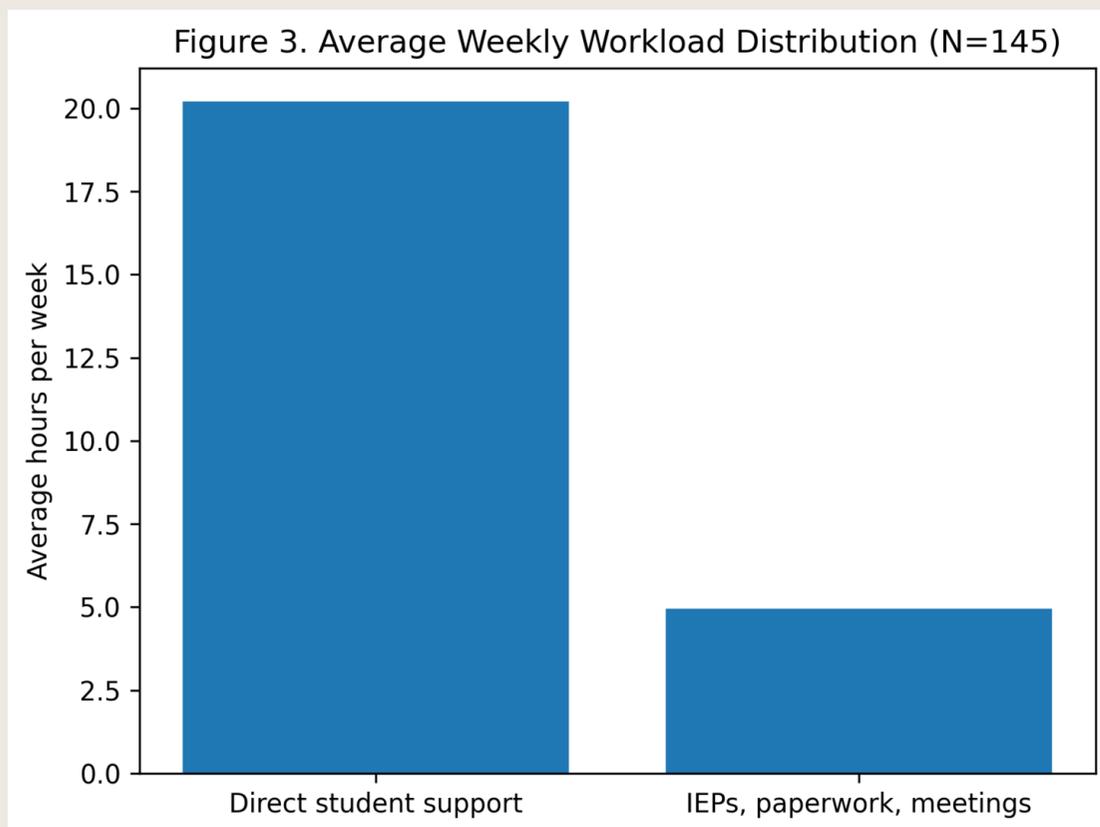
When vacancies occur, remaining staff often absorb additional responsibilities, increasing the risk of burnout and further turnover.

Workload Insight

Caseload size alone does not reflect total workload. Paperwork, meetings, travel, and coverage during vacancies significantly increase staff workload and increase the risk of burnout.

These patterns underscore that staffing decisions based on caseload alone may underestimate total workload demands, particularly when vacancies and non-instructional responsibilities are present.

Figure 3. Distribution of Weekly Work Time



Knowledge Sharing and Promising Practices

Districts across West Central have implemented local strategies to support workforce stability. These include informal grow-your-own pathways from paraprofessional to teaching roles, mentoring and onboarding support for new staff, and strategic use of contracted services to address short-term gaps.

While these practices show promise, they are largely informal and rely on local leadership capacity. District leaders noted limited structures for sharing strategies, tools, or lessons learned across districts, despite shared challenges.

Several participants identified regional collaboration as a key opportunity to reduce duplication, share effective practices, and support smaller districts with limited internal capacity.

While grounded in the West Central context, the findings reflect workforce challenges common across many New Hampshire districts and are intended to be adaptable for use in other communities.

Together, these findings are intended to support district leaders in assessing recruitment strategies, retention pressures, staffing models, and equitable access for students with disabilities, serving as both a description of current conditions and a guide for action.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Regional Recruitment Pipelines

Develop coordinated recruitment strategies and grow-your-own pathways to expand local candidate pools.

2. Provide Structured Support for Certification Pathways

Offer mentoring, clear guidance, and coordinated support to staff pursuing certification.

3. Protect Time for Instruction, Planning, and Case Management

Review schedules and staffing structures to ensure protected planning time and manageable workloads.

4. Address Paraprofessional Stability as a Retention Priority

Review compensation, scheduling, and career pathways for paraprofessionals.

5. Formalize Knowledge Sharing Across Districts

Create regular opportunities for districts to share workforce strategies and lessons learned.

6. Institutionalize Workforce Data Review and Planning

Maintain shared workforce indicators and regularly revisit staffing conditions.

Conclusion

This study offers a locally grounded snapshot of special education workforce conditions across West Central districts. Although challenges are shaped by geography, scale, and labor market constraints, districts share common pressures and opportunities. Addressing workforce sustainability will require coordinated, data-informed strategies that balance regional collaboration with local context.

The findings and recommendations are intended to support planning conversations and collective problem-solving as districts work to strengthen special education workforce capacity across the region.

Access the Full Report

District leaders and partners seeking deeper analysis, data-informed examples, and practical recommendations to support recruitment, retention, staffing sustainability, and equitable access for students with disabilities can access the full report here:

[Report Access](#)