

THE SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFFING CRISIS

America’s schools need enough special education teachers and specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) to serve students with disabilities. Students with disabilities rely on coordinated, specialized support to learn, communicate, participate, and thrive at school. But across the country, schools are struggling to recruit and retain the special education teachers and SISP who make that support possible. When these positions remain unfilled, students may wait longer for evaluations and services, educators carry heavier caseloads and workloads, and schools face greater difficulty delivering the individualized support students are entitled to receive.

SHORTAGES BY PROFESSION

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS	45 states For the 2024–25 school year, 45 states reported special education as a teacher shortage area—the highest number of states reporting a shortage in any teaching field. 34% of public schools In a separate fall 2024 national survey, 34% of public schools reported that special education teaching was understaffed, making it the most commonly reported understaffed teaching area. The profession-specific information below shows how shortages extend beyond special education teachers. Sources: Learning Policy Institute / U.S. Department of Education Teacher Shortage Area data; NCES School Pulse Panel, fall 2024
SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS	79% In the 2024 ASHA Schools Survey, 79% of responding school-based SLPs reported more job openings than job seekers. More than 24% reported that their school or district could not meet students’ speech-language needs. Source: ASHA, 2024 Schools Survey <i>Respondent survey; percentages reflect participating school-based SLPs, not a census of all schools.</i>
SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS	1,071:1 The national student-to-school-psychologist ratio was 1,071:1 in 2024–25—more than double NASP’s recommended ratio of 1:500. Source: NASP, State Shortages Data Dashboard (2024–25) <i>National ratio compared with NASP’s recommended staffing ratio.</i>
SCHOOL NURSES	25% 39% National school-nursing staffing data indicate that 25% of U.S. schools have no school nurse and 39% have a nurse present full-time every day. Other schools rely on part-time or shared coverage. Source: National Association of School Nurses, School Nursing Staffing Data <i>Source compilation cited in the original resource; confirm the underlying survey year before updating this statistic.</i>
SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS	School social workers support students’ social, emotional, behavioral, and family-related needs. Staffing capacity depends on districts’ funded positions and local workforce supply, which vary substantially across communities. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook <i>Occupational information; this section intentionally does not present a national vacancy estimate.</i>
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS, PHYSICAL THERAPISTS & AUDIOLOGISTS	These related-service professionals are essential members of many special education teams. Districts may face recruitment and retention challenges as school-based positions must compete with healthcare settings, such as hospitals, outpatient clinics, and rehabilitation centers. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook <i>Occupational information; this section intentionally does not present a national vacancy estimate.</i>
SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY ASSISTANTS (SLPAS)	Under the supervision of certified SLPs and consistent with state requirements, SLPAs can help extend service capacity. Their roles, permitted tasks, and availability vary by state and district. Source: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Assistant Resources <i>Professional guidance; scope-of-practice requirements are state-specific.</i>

WHY FULLY STAFFED SCHOOLS MATTER

✓ For Students

Better outcomes	Adequate staffing helps students with disabilities receive the timely evaluations, consistent related services, and individualized instruction outlined in their IEPs. Staffing challenges have been associated with delayed or missed special education services in some districts. GAO (2024)
Equity	Staffing challenges are not experienced equally. Research indicates that special education staffing problems can be more acute in rural schools and in schools serving students from lower-income backgrounds or historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Full staffing is an important part of ensuring meaningful access to IDEA services and supports. LDAmerica
Mental health & well-being	School psychologists, social workers, and nurses play distinct but complementary roles in supporting students' mental, behavioral, social, emotional, and health needs. Adequate staffing helps schools provide timely, coordinated support and maintain safe, supportive learning environments.

✓ For School Districts

Legal compliance	IDEA requires public agencies to make a free appropriate public education available to eligible children with disabilities. Staffing shortages do not remove that obligation; when required services are delayed or not delivered, districts may face complaints or due-process proceedings. IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(1)
Financial savings	Teacher turnover requires spending on separation, recruitment, hiring, onboarding, training, and support. In large districts, the average cost to replace one departing teacher can be nearly \$25,000. Investments in retention can help districts avoid some recurring costs. Learning Policy Institute (2024)
Stronger schools	Stable, fully staffed teams support continuity for students and families, strengthen collaboration among professionals, and allow districts to focus resources on instruction and student services rather than repeated emergency hiring.

✓ For School Staff

Manageable caseloads	When positions remain unfilled, remaining professionals may need to take on additional students, responsibilities, or coverage. Research on special educator working conditions links heavy responsibilities without adequate resources to stress, burnout, and plans to leave. LDAmerica
Professional effectiveness	With reasonable workloads and adequate time for planning, collaboration, documentation, and service delivery, professionals are better positioned to provide individualized, high-quality support rather than simply covering the most urgent needs.
Retention & morale	Supportive working conditions—including adequate staffing, effective leadership, mentoring and induction, collaboration time, educator voice in decision-making, and competitive compensation—are evidence-supported strategies for strengthening retention. Learning Policy Institute (2024)

National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (NCPSSERS)

Learn more and take action: specialdshortages.org